

REVIEWS

James Engell. *The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values*.
University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1999. 198p.

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Recently, there has been increasing interest, across all areas of language education, in what is often referred to as the "public sphere." James Engell's *The Committed Word* is a timely addition to discussions of the role of literary and rhetorical education in contemporary culture.

Engell suggests that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "democratic societies, and societies struggling to be democratic, establish in the English-speaking world a modern practice of language and rhetoric devoted to the deliberation of public values" (163). Subsequently, however, language education in the U.S. split into literature and rhetoric/composition, the former limited to *belles lettres* and the latter to the "correction of rudimentary faults in grammar and style" (167). "What," Engell asks, "can be done to redirect energy to all broader uses of literary expression, including those that inform public life?" (163).

Engell's purpose is to restore to literature the meaning it had before it became limited to *belles lettres*. The essays explore how selected major political and literary figures in the Anglo-American tradition (Vico is the one exception) used "heightened" language effectively to influence the course of their societies. They show that the texts of Burke, Pope, Paine, and Lincoln had high aesthetic value, appealed to the imagination, and were deeply engaged in cultural and political issues of their time; they united "practical imagination with moral stance" and used "powerful language attuned to ethical predicaments and human motives" (150-51).

While the collection makes a persuasive case for a broadened literary education, the essays are uneven and, although they have presumably not been published elsewhere, seem to have been written for diverse purposes. The best essays in terms of the book's overall thrust are the first two, on Burke and Pope, and perhaps the last one on Lincoln. The essay on Swift boils down to showing that Swift's satire applies to contemporary academia and science, while the essay on Vico argues for the applicability of Vico's ideas on educating the imagination to the cultural situation today, but simplifies (at times to the edge of misrepresentation) some key rhetorical concepts. The essay on Lowth seems most tangentially related to the others.

The book is addressed to literature scholars and I would heartily recommend it to my colleagues in the English department. As a rhetorician, however, I read it with a mixture of satisfaction and unease: satisfaction, because here is a colleague from the literature side of campus trying to give its due to rhetoric; unease, because I felt like a native watching my country being "discovered."

Much that Engell argues is not new to rhetoricians (although the demonstration is erudite and useful). Consider the following statements: "Language can have the effect on creating a reality, of making the human world, or at least acting as midwife to one" (85). Or, "Often ignored in

contemporary literary discussions of 'rhetoric' is the crucial operation of language in the affairs of society -- an operation understood not solely through linguistics but through rhetoric conceived broadly, not as classification of terms but as the formation of moral judgement and argument, the elucidation of a worldview" (86). Perhaps in literary discussions, but certainly not in the rhetoric and composition journals I have been reading. I am pleased to see that my colleagues in literature are discovering this; I am uneasy that they ever thought otherwise.

I am even more uneasy about what I see (although this may be an uncharitable reading) as the implicit assumption behind the argument of the book, an assumption that could be crudely summarized somewhat as follows: "Literature includes rhetoric; it has always included it. We (literary scholars) have lost sight of that connection in literary studies and, while people in rhetoric/comp have meanwhile appropriated rhetoric and made a mess of it, we need to reclaim it." Since I occupy the other side of the institutional fence, and have often tried to persuade unsympathetic colleagues from the English department that rhetoric is relevant to literary study (and even been asked to stop teaching literature because I was "rhetoricizing" and "politicizing" it too much), I could as well argue that we in rhetoric have always known all that and, now that the literature folks have made a mess of literature and painted themselves into a narrow corner, it is up to us to restore literature, as an aspect of the multiple uses and manifold engagements of language in culture, to its proper place (within a broader theoretical and educational enterprise of rhetoric). And what better place for that than the rhetoric department?

Engell appears to assume the implicit primacy of the category "literature," even while critiquing its current truncated sense and examining patently expository texts. In a word, he seems to be reclaiming rhetoric for literature, while the intellectual history he traces (albeit in a fragmented way) might as well (or more powerfully, if told in full) be read as arguing for reclaiming literature for rhetoric, especially considering that "literature" itself is a rhetorical category of relatively recent provenance. For a broader historical perspective, a reader would be well advised to balance Engell with Renato Barilli's *Rhetoric (Theory and History of Literature Vol. 63)*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), a brief but sweeping account of the intellectual debates to which Engell refers but by fragments. For instance, Engell argues at one point that "literature [can be] conceived as the study of language in relation to experience and values. This was once the compass of rhetoric, though often degenerating into a classification of tropes and figures" (88). This last clause abbreviates complex shifts in thinking about language, knowledge, and reality over several hundred years of Western intellectual history, during which rhetoric was reduced to tropes and figures not through its own degenerate tendencies, and definitely not in relation to "literature" (which as an intellectual category did not even exist), but as a result of shifting classifications and relationships among such categories as logic, dialectic, certainty, probability, truth, and so on. For much of its turbulent history, rhetoric was a thriving civilization before literature emerged from the woods, and, while I'm happy to share the riches of rhetorical territory, I do not want to find myself (again) a subaltern royal subject.

Despite such misgivings, however, I found Engell's book erudite and useful, and a valuable addition, when properly balanced by other accounts, to the debates that continue to reshape, as they always have, the intellectual and academic landscape of language studies.