



Semiotic Phenomenology of Rhetoric: Eidetic Practice in Henry Grattan's Discourse on Tolerance

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Reviewed by

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In an ever-increasing number of cases, the practice of phenomenology is shifting from traditional centers in university departments of philosophy, where Edmund Husserl, together with his disciples and dissenters, are studied and critiqued with strictly theoretical standards in mind, to other departments of learning, like speech and education, where a readier context for practical application prevails. This may, on the one hand, be a symptom of its decline or entrenchment in its original setting; on the other hand, it is surely a sign of the vitality and fecundity of the discipline that it has managed to pervade diverse fields and, in doing so, bring them a little closer together. The advancement of this *rapprochement* of areas of specialty has been considerably aided by an alliance with the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology has struck with the University Press of America to produce the Current Continental Research series in an inexpensive but serviceable format. Richard Lanigan has provided this series with its latest addition, his *Semiotic Phenomenology of Rhetoric*.

No theme is more fundamental to the human sciences, particularly at the current stage of their development and inter-relations, than that of language as it is actually used. And surely there is no theme which challenges the application of phenomenology, with its inbuilt flair for the pure *eidos*, in quite so direct a way as one which recognizes the priority of linguistic enactment over conceptual clarification. Both considerations bode well for Richard Lanigan's most recent work, which takes its place among other prominent efforts to test and extend the plasticity of phenomenology by bringing it to bear on the problems of a discipline with a claim to a unity and integrity of its own. Not that there is not already a strong tradition, within theoretical phenomenology itself, of interest in language; in fact, particularly in much of the later work of Merleau-Ponty, this interest has been elevated to the status of *Leitmotiv* and continues to dominate in Derrida's post-phenomenological grammatology. Lanigan's effort, accordingly, is to be seen both as a contribution to the ongoing hermeneutic discussion and as an exemplification of the

fruits of this discussion for the benefit of his own special field of speech communication.

Lanigan makes no bones about allying himself with the existential phenomenological camp of Merleau-Ponty. His first chapter is an interesting and polished, if dense, explication of Merleau-Ponty's basic theory and features the introduction of the essential distinctions, like the famous one between "langage" (sign-system), "langue" (spoken language), and "parole" (speaking), which are to be decisive for his own analysis. As for this analysis, it is effected in relation to a subject matter tellingly chosen. Lanigan takes as a model of effective transformational discourse the speeches of Henry Grattan, himself the object of hardly more than footnote recognition in world history but a significant champion of Catholic tolerance in the late eighteenth century British and Irish parliamentary debates. By focusing both on the existential figure of the man and the rhetorical figures he employs, Lanigan attempts to establish the basis of a reciprocity between the two and to glean from this a deepened understanding of linguistic phenomena in their dimension as effective powers of appeal in the problematic of tolerance as an essential feature of proto-ethical comportment.

Lanigan introduces the necessary background of historical material by considering first the archaic sediments of conflict and prejudice relating to the "Catholic Question" in the United Kingdom of the late eighteenth century. This review of the historical context both sets the stage for a descriptive treatment of Grattan's rhetorical praxis and affords Lanigan the independent point of reference needed to establish one of the essential features of his thesis: the claim that Grattan's effectiveness as a parliamentary speaker grew from an existential sensitivity to the variable nuances of the situation then current as much as from his undoubted mastery of oratorical techniques. Lanigan then consistently carries through a strategy of phenomenological description, reduction, and interpretation to subject the features of Grattan's conscious experience (p. 107), the structure of his semiotics (p. 135), and his hermeneutic style (p. 151) to analysis using the state-of-the-art categories he had laid out in his first chapter. Although perceptions may vary concerning the extent to which the relations between category and exemplification are forced, it is safe to say that one product of these labors is an enrichment in content and structure of the categories themselves. At every turn, such an analysis permits new and often unsuspected issues to be raised which, even in their problematic state, may occasion fruitful elaboration or revision of theory. And sometimes these issues may flow together in such a way that they express a leading cultural proclivity.

If we may focus on just one such issue, I would propose to raise a question with regard to the "existential" thesis already mentioned,

which seems to come as close as any to providing an undergirding thematic unity to Lanigan's book. One might suppose it to be an occupational hazard of anyone undertaking the kind of historical study which Nietzsche called "monumental," or any study revolving around an exemplary figure, that there is a tendency to lionize the hero. The psychological roots of this tendency is a study in itself. The risk of the hazard, however, may be consciously taken, with the proviso that what is at stake is a positive characterization that is useful in suggesting contemporary possibilities and dimensions of meaning. As far as Lanigan's thesis of the correlation between Grattan's existential standing and the effectiveness of his rhetorical postures is concerned, what is decisive is that it points to a viable and exemplary possibility of discourse. There is no question that Lanigan has adduced detail and structural analysis enough to make good Hegel's opinion that "speeches are actions among men, and, indeed, most effective ones." What still remains in question is the *positivity* of the characterization. And here, against its background of optimism and eudaemonism, which perhaps do not need to be defended, the emergent crux of the discourse on tolerance seems to suggest a certain inevitability of the "synergism of man, history, and oratorical discourse" (p. 197) arising from an "existential adherence" of positive value. Let us grant the point, but now invert the issue: could we conceive the energies of the discursively self-interpreting animal as being actively torn asunder, and, if so, what would be the existential correlate of this act? Would it be a failure of "existential adherence" (irresoluteness?) or an "existential adherence" of negative value (resolute evil, destructive power)? The question calls for the counter-example; one wonders whether "Vehemence and Authenticity" (p. 169) could be invoked as the name of a section in a companion volume on, say, Adolph Hitler's resolute existentiality in relation to his rhetorical power.

But this issue cuts deeply and touches nerves far beyond the scope of Lanigan's work. What he has provided us has an interest of its own and stands on its own as a phenomenological exemplification of the existentials of semiosis. And perhaps Lanigan has proved, against Kant, that, given the abiding impediments to enlightenment, we may "renounce the haughty name of tolerance" only at our own peril.