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From Elocution to New Criticism: An Episode in the History of Rhetoric

Abstract: The similarity between elocution and New Criticism in method of analysis, or hermeneutics, seems patent: because elocutionists taught reading aloud, they necessarily considered a text word by word; New Critics revolutionized literary study through a similar if more sophisticated method of textual analysis, an approach which also necessitated a certain vocalizing of the words. And the two groups were curiously alike in their fumbling attempts to describe the nature of literature, its ontology, as a kind of experience. The progression from elocution to New Criticism actually forms an episode in the ongoing dispersal of rhetoric as an academic subject.

Keywords: elocution, New Criticism, literary study, dispersal of rhetoric

The study of rhetorical delivery—cleverly called elocution—became a specialty in England’s confident Age of Enlightenment. By the time it reached America it had undergone a sea change, and, having fused with a certain French development, it attained a pinnacle of fashion in the nineteenth century. Then its popularity plummeted. In the early twentieth century it was widely ridiculed and virtually disappeared from American academia. Only virtually, however. For elocution in its later stages merely underwent a kind of scattering. Many of its procedures were adopted by departments of physical education, dance, speech, the-

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atre, English, et al., a fate not unlike that of rhetoric itself, which for centuries has suffered an increasing dispersal among a tangle of academic disciplines. In this piece I would like to discuss only a part of that dispersal, the part whereby elocution, initially the study of rhetorical delivery, earned a degree of literary respectability. For when New Criticism revolutionized the classroom study of literature in the 1930s both its hermeneutics, or analytical method, and that method's *raison d'être*, its view of literary ontology, resembled what a certain kind of elocution had become right before the name and, ostensibly, the subject itself disappeared from American academia. By that time, the original aim of elocution—the study of rhetorical delivery—had become less important for major elocutionists than the study of literature.

In mid twentieth century, while New Criticism was still in its heyday, two popular movies made elocution seem not unfairly laughable. In *Singing in the Rain* (1952), which is set in the late Twenties, an elocutionist tries to teach articulate, cultivated speech to the screechy-voiced character played by Jean Hagan while another elocutionist has Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor practice reciting a nonsense passage: "Moses supposes his toeses are roses. But Moses supposes erroneously." The scenes show in comic fashion what silent film stars apparently had to go through when the movies acquired primitive sound and "learned to talk." What the actors had to go through was a fatuous, *passé* and largely irrelevant instruction in "stage diction," a declamatory mode of delivery originally designed to make actors' lines understandable and audible in live performances pre-technology (singers were equally immersed in such training).¹ In *The Music Man* (1962, based on a Broadway hit from 1957), Hermione Gingold, playing the wife of the mayor of River City, Iowa, leads a group of ladies in "posture exercises," after which they assume various "Grecian urn" and "water fountain" poses. "Splendid, ladies!" she exclaims ecstatically; "Our Delsarte display will be the highlight

¹"Declamatory acting necessitates strong vocal projection, clear articulation, and pronounced inflection" Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture 1880–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), p. 100. For examples of singers who endured the same training, listen to the opera stars of this period or, among movie singers, almost any one of John Boles' soundtracks, or Jeanette MacDonald's. Moreover, it is one of history's ironies that what could pass these days for elocutionary training in Hollywood is now aimed at teaching actors some of the very dialects that the old elocutionists sought to remove; see Alec Wilkinson, "Talk This Way," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 9, 2009), 32–38.

of the ice cream sociable!"² Delsarte was a famous if fading name in European, English, and American elocution at the time of the movie's setting, the American Midwest in early twentieth century. Especially popular with women, Delsartism centered on silent posturing and stage movement, at times to an absurd degree. As the film shows, even the boonies had elocution.

Moreover, taken together the movies also reveal, respectively, the two chief specialties of Victorian elocution, voice and gesture—which are, of course, the two traditional branches of rhetorical delivery. The stated or assumed goal of each elocutionary specialty was to train someone to appear in public as an actor, lecturer, reader, sermonizer, on the stage, or in a church or perhaps in a Chautauqua or Lyceum, or in any of the various venues available early and late in the Victorian age, including such silent entertainments as statue posing or imitations of famous paintings, often featured in theatres as entr'actes or in "ice cream sociables." Certainly in imparting the means of public performance the Victorian elocutionists had notable success. It was training in elocution, for example, which spurred the development of a young stammering, inarticulate Henry Ward Beecher into one of the greatest orators of the nineteenth century, a period in which "oratory played a central role in American culture."³ But elocutionary training also offered subsidiary goals which had considerable appeal for those learners who had no plans to appear on the public platform, but sought rather improvement in one's voice, appearance, or bodily health.

Certain of these subsidiary goals were dramatized in another movie, *My Fair Lady* (1964), based on a popular stage musical, itself based in turn on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, first performed in 1914 but set in England's late Victorian age. In this play Professor Henry Higgins gives the cockney girl Eliza Doolittle extensive training in speech skills as part of his successful effort to dramatically improve her social mobility. Shaw identifies Higgins not as an elocutionist but as a "phonetician." There is little difference, however, between the training he offers and that offered by elocutionists of the late Victorian age (Shaw's preface mentions a prominent one, "Melville Bell"). Indeed, phonetics, semiotics, speech correction,

²When "The Music Man" was remade for TV in 2003 (after a Broadway revival of the show), the arcane references to Delsarte remained.

³Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), pp. 65–67. The movie *The King's Speech* (2010) dramatizes George VI's cure of stammering by elocution-like means.

American sign language, even the telephone, are among the innovations that arose from the work of elocution professors, particularly in their efforts to study the voice scientifically. For that matter, so far as gesture is concerned, the art of modern dance, gymnastics, and physical education gained significant impetus from the Delsartism mentioned earlier.⁴

What Shaw's drama brings to the present discussion, however, is the glimpse of elocution in its later stages, when the subsidiary goals of its Victorian version became dominant and centered more on the voice than on gesture. It was aimed essentially at cultivating and standardizing speech, not necessarily scientizing the study of spoken language or even restoring the original goal of improving rhetorical delivery but enhancing the student's efforts at self-improvement by wiping out mispronunciations and traces of dialect. But for my thesis the most relevant point is one not made clear in Shaw's drama: in late elocution, the pedagogical method was, essentially, reading aloud. Whether privately, or in the lower grades or in university, the aims of elocution were sought through "textual enclosure," a "technology of control" which made this elocution an art "circumscribed by literacy."⁵ Further, toward the close of the nineteenth century, several elocutionary theorists began increasingly to centralize close reading of the printed page, considering a printed text through word-by-word analysis and offering literary understanding as their chief aim. In their interpretive techniques and in what they said at times about the nature of literature these elocutionists foreshadowed the coming New Critics. A brief look at history will help make my point.

⁴The work of Alexander Graham Bell and his father Alexander Melville Bell and the connections of that work with elocution are discussed in *History of Speech Education in America*, ed. Karl R. Wallace (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954). See also Mary Margaret Robb, *Oral Interpretation of Literature in American Colleges and Universities* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1941), esp. pp. 155–62. A vivid discussion of the connections between Delsartism and modern dance is Ted Shawn's *Every Little Movement: A Book about Francois Delsarte . . .* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1968). See also Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (Westport, Conn. and London, 1999, #56 in the series "Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance") and Emmett A. Rice, *A Brief History of Physical Education* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1926), esp. p. 183.

⁵Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech," *Text and Performance Quarterly* (20: 4), 327.

ELOCUTION

Elocution as a word for rhetorical delivery came from the Latin term *elocutio*, itself a derivative of *eloquor*, meaning simply to express oneself. *Elocutio* had been used for centuries in rhetorical studies to mean style, the third of five offices of composition: invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*), delivery (*actio, pronuntiatio*). *Elocutio* suggests its cognate “eloquence,” whereas the English word *style* is derived from *stylus*, which suggests writing rather than the more oral “speaking out” of *eloquor*. Moreover, throughout the centuries *elocutio* had been the subject of endless attention as rhetoricians wrote tirelessly about stylistic devices—figures, tropes, schemes—to such an extent that these devices often seemed to encompass the whole of rhetoric itself, as if *elocutio* were not only a separable specialty but the very means of attaining eloquence. Thus when the effort arose to further knowledge of rhetoric’s fifth office, *elocution* was a broader and even more clever term than *delivery*.

In spite of Demosthenes’ insistence that delivery actually constitutes the entire effectiveness of oratory, this fifth office had received minimal theoretical attention. Neophyte orators, from ancient times through the Renaissance, were often advised simply to practice a lot and observe skilled actors. Ramist reformers in the sixteenth century, themselves major dispersers of the old rhetoric, bemoaned the fact that skills in oral delivery had not yet been “perfected.”⁶ As noted, the old rhetoric used two terms interchangeably for delivery: *actio* and *pronuntiatio*, each encompassing both of the main features of delivery, gesture and voice. Thanks largely to the work of eighteenth-century and later elocutionists, *actio* and *pronuntiatio* became confined to the specific skills signified by their English derivatives. In this juggling of terms and concentration on parts, the integrity of traditional rhetoric as a compositional or analytical system continued to shatter.

Early in the seventeenth century Francis Bacon provided the first impetus to “perfect” the theory of rhetorical delivery. At least, John Bulwer claimed that his work *Chirologia . . . Chironoma* (1644) was inspired by Bacon’s complaint (in *Advancement of Learning*, 1605) that Aristotle neglected attention to the expressive features of the body. Bulwer tried to rectify that flaw first by classifying some of

⁶See Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), esp. Ch. XII.

the smaller elements of delivery, such as gestures of the hand and fingers. He promised a future work detailing gestures of the head. But no such work appeared. *Chirologia . . . Chironomia* had only minor influence in the seventeenth century and is perhaps best regarded as something of a transition between the Latin, or Ciceronian, rhetoric of the English Renaissance and the attention given to elocution in the eighteenth century.⁷

Several additional causes have been adduced for the rise of the elocutionary movement first in England and then in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: increased interest in standardizing and improving the English language; the poor speaking by preachers in Protestant churches, where sermons had become the center of the worship service; the recognition of the power of public speaking in democratic societies; the resurgent popularity of the theatre; and the demands of the middle class for training and education.⁸ Closely connected with the last of these are what I have referred to as the subsidiary goals of elocution, such as the drive toward self-improvement and social mobility. Too, in tracing the growth of elocution in America, its nature and eventual connection with New Criticism, two other developments should also be noted. Foremost is the increasing prominence of psychology in the nineteenth century. The other is a certain curiosity lurking in the wings throughout that age, the fad of spiritualism. Each had its own special effects on elocution but above all on ideas about literary hermeneutics and ontology, about how literature is to be studied and what it is.

Eighteenth-century England, which saw a spate of published books on elocution, established the common acceptance of the word itself as meaning (initially at least) effective rhetorical delivery, though similar usage was not unknown a century earlier.⁹ The first book to use the word in its title was John Mason's *An Essay on Elocu-*

⁷See David Potter's foreword to John Bulwer, *Chirologia . . . Chironomia . . .*, ed. James W. Cleary (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. xxxvi. As Joseph R. Roach points out, Bulwer's work was based on a conceptual model of the body that was as old as Quintilian, a model that underwent a radical change in the eighteenth century, which may account somewhat for the subsequent neglect of Bulwer's work; *The Player's Passion* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1985), see esp. Ch. 1, in which Roach comments on Bulwer's other works on gesture: *Pathomyotomia* (1649) and *Anthropometamorphosis* (1650).

⁸Frederick W. Haberman, "English Sources of American Elocution," in Wallace, ed., *History*, cited in n. 4 above, pp.105–26. Like many historians, Haberman neglects Bulwer.

⁹The OED gives a few examples of that usage dating as early as 1613. One of the more famous is Milton's in *Paradise Lost* (1667), IX.748.

tion, or Pronunciation (1748), a work devoted to “the right Management of the Voice in reading or speaking.” Somewhat later, Thomas Sheridan (*Lectures on Elocution*, 1763) and John Walker (*Elements of Elocution*, 1781), offered approaches that by appearing opposite to each other provided a framework for subsequent developments. Sheridan—actor, teacher, and father of the playwright—had educational, literary, and lexicographical interests in mind in writing on the subject. His model of good delivery was good conversation, as he described it, and therefore his approach was thought to be more “natural” in emphasis than that offered by Walker, who relied heavily on rules and notations for an idealized delivery. Historians and some “natural” elocutionists have referred to the latter as “mechanical,” a perhaps not unfair denigration of the prescriptive nature of the approach. Sheridan’s “natural” approach, with its advice to observe good speech in action, tended to offer more instruction in interpreting the printed page. Walker’s “mechanical” approach, which devised ingenious pre-technological means of recording performances, spent its energy in systems of notation and in devising rules for standardizing good delivery.¹⁰

The most sensible features of this latter approach are its foundational connections with the work of speech scientists, such as Dr. Benjamin Rush in America and Alexander Melville Bell in Edinburgh and London, theorists who produced detailed analyses of vocal elements and the physiology of speech. The work of the second theorist, Shaw’s “Melville Bell,” had considerable influence on the career of his son, Alexander Graham Bell, and, for that matter, notable influence on studies of deafness, sign language, and the invention of the telephone. Although it bandied the word “elocution” and offered instruction in delivery, its study of the science of sound seems lessened by the term “mechanical.”

On the other hand, falling within this latter approach and truly deserving the name “mechanical” is one of the first English elocutionary works to have impact in America in the nineteenth century: *Chironomia or, a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* by the Rev. Gilbert Austin, 1806. Given the profession of the author, it is not surprising that the needs of the preacher are foremost. But Austin’s work—which takes no notice whatsoever of the similarly entitled work of his countryman Bulwer—also encompasses acting and opera as well as the oral performance of literature. Aside from his “scale of reading” in

¹⁰An interesting and much fuller discussion of this background is offered by Robb, *Oral Interpretation*, cited in n. 4 above, pp. 19–70.

six stages ("1. Intelligible. 2. Correct. 3. Impressive. 4. Rhetorical. 5. Dramatic. 6. Epic,"¹¹), Austin offers very little instruction in how one is meant to go about interpreting the printed page. He becomes most detailed in his system of notation, which in depicting models of performance becomes prescriptive. For example, he notates the opening line of Gray's *Elegy* in the following way:

Ls veq—vhx a——B pef——d
 The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
 aR2

The notation indicates, or rather instructs, that someone performing those words should do this: strike an attitude of listening with the ear turned toward the apparent sound (Ls) while stepping to the right second position (aR2, the right foot sliding forward, the left heel raised) with the right palm vertical, the arm elevated in an "oblique transverse" position (veq) while the left palm is also vertical, the left arm horizontal and extended (vhx); then the right hand ascends (a) while the left hand also ascends, palms prone, arms elevated in a "forward transverse" position, both hands ultimately descending on the final word. Austin includes extensive drawings illustrating the notations. Obviously, the emphasis has shifted from voice to gesture. True it is that if one goes through the motions, one does indeed get some feeling for what might be going on the poem. But exactly how one is meant to apply the process to other poems is not so carefully spelled out. Neither, for that matter, is there clear indication of how Austin came up with this delivery for Gray's poem in the first place.

Nonetheless, some of the most ludicrous features of the elocutionary movement, as shown in Austin's puzzling notations and continued in a host of publications by others, remain noteworthy in at least one important respect: they make the body central to literary study. Delivery is the body's trained response to emotions in the literary text.¹² This matter is simply easier to see in the work of Austin,

¹¹Reprint edited by Mary Margaret Robb and Lester Thonssen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), p. 190.

¹²Dana Harrington has discussed the important analytical operations of the practice *ab initio*, particularly in their relation to Enlightenment ideas about taste: "For the process of reading texts aloud was thought not only to strengthen the faculty of reason associated with taste but also to train the imagination and passions in ways that conformed to the norms of taste"; "Remembering the Body: Eighteenth-Century Elocution and the Oral Tradition," *Rhetorica* (28: 1), 93. So far as rhetoric generally is concerned, argue Debra Hawhee and Cory Holding, Austin represents a moment "in the history of rhetoric when bodies, passions, their materiality and their movement

and others of the “mechanical” school. But this very emphasis on engaging the body, and in turn engaging the emotions and imagination both of the performer and of the audience, remained central and overrode differences in all early theorists, whether “natural” or “mechanical.” In this manner, the body’s centrality as an instrument of literary understanding continued as a central, indeed crucial feature of all elocution. However gymnastic the “mechanical” approach might appear at its extreme, as in Austin, the role of the body in literary understanding not only adds clarity to the idea of literature as experience but also continues to sanction modern performance studies as an approach to literature. I shall return to this point.

In American education the first most significant elocutionist was Lewis Baxter Monroe (1825–79), who is noted more for his classroom influence on other elocutionists than for having produced a significant body of theory. Most of his published writings were elementary speech textbooks, many simply anthologies of readings, such as those that might be used for end-of-the-school-year “examination evenings” so wryly depicted by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*, 1876.¹³ Monroe’s 1869 book *Manual of Physical and Vocal Training for the use of schools and for private instruction* has a telling title: it is in part an early effort to join elocution and physical education. Monroe is identified on the title page as “Superintendent of Physical and Vocal Culture in the Public Schools of Boston, Mass.” The book offers exercises for posture, carriage, breathing, vocal skills, and acknowledges the work of Rush and Melville Bell. He would seem therefore to belong to the “mechanical” approach in elocution, with its effort to categorize, name, and isolate the elements of speech, while devising simple exercises for young students in order to improve their bodily health as well as their oral delivery. But that characterization is only partial when set within the total body of Monroe’s work and influence.

When Monroe became the first head of the School of Oratory at Boston University (where his faculty included Alexander Graham Bell), among his students were leading figures in the field of elocution, two of whom founded institutions that are still in existence: Charles Wesley Emerson (1837–1908), founder of Emerson College

come to matter intensely”; “Case Studies in Material Rhetoric: Joseph Priestley and Gilbert Austin,” *Rhetorica* (28: 3), 289.

¹³See Chapter XXI. Even wrier is Melville’s remark in *Pierre* (1852): the narrator characterizes education in the period as offering “some touch of belles letters, and composition, and that great American bulwark and bore—elocution” (Book XX).

(Boston), and Samuel Silas Curry (1947–21), co-founder (with his wife, also an elocutionist) of Curry College (Milton, MA). Emerson College's Web site describes Emerson as having studied "Delsarte and Swedenborg under the direction of Professor Lewis B. Monroe." By contrast, Curry became famous for his psychologizing "think the thought" approach to elocution, the ultimate "natural" approach and one that eventually became dominant in the academic world.

Monroe's Delsartism is unmistakable, as is almost every effort in the period to impart "physical and vocal culture." As his interest in Swedenborg¹⁴ suggests and as his textbooks indicate, he relied more on intuition than on analysis for grasping the meaning of a text. It may not be surprising to discover that Monroe's first book was a contribution to spiritualism: *A Revelation from Heaven: or, the New Faith, being an explanation of the various spiritual manifestations which have of late been so common throughout the country* (1851). The author believes himself commissioned by God to verify the reality of the spirit world, which is evidenced by the communication of departed spirits who reach the living through an invisible "fluid." Perhaps the book is simply the venture of a young man who was trying to capitalize on a fad stimulated by news about the famous Fox sisters and their table-rapping in 1848, by the popularity of mesmerism, telepathy, and magnetic healing, even by fascination with electricity and the telegraph as kinds of mysterious, invisible, most likely spiritual energy.¹⁵ Published for whatever reason, Monroe's book is another indication that the subject of spiritualism in nineteenth century intel-

¹⁴Edyth Renshaw claims that Monroe introduced Transcendentalism into the field in "Five Private Schools of Speech," in Wallace, ed., *History*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 302. The argument is based on very slim evidence: a dissertation citing Fred Winslow Adams, "Boston as an Elocutionary Center," *Werner's Voice Magazine*, XVI (April, 1894), 114–15. Perhaps there is a failure here to distinguish Transcendentalism from (as acknowledged on Emerson College's Web site) Monroe's studies of Swedenborg. Certainly Swedenborg inspired Transcendentalism as well as spiritualism, as Bret E. Carroll observes; *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), see pp. 25–33. Swedenborg seems more relevant to Monroe's 1851 book than Transcendentalism. Nonetheless, each alike—Transcendentalism, Swedenborgism—places a strong emphasis on inwardness, intuition, the actions of one's "soul."

¹⁵All these were later given increased poignancy by the unbearable loss of family members and friends in the Civil War. See Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), pp. 22, 25, 32, 35, 425–46; see also: Carroll, cited in n. 14 above; Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), which places spiritualism in a wide cultural context of belief about a "sympathetic cosmology" (pp. 3–4 and passim).

lectual history can hardly be dismissed, as we shall continue to see. The religious model of man as consisting of body and soul fits well the continuing suggestion through elocutionary performances that literature is an experience that can only be fully entered into with one's whole being, not simply with the mind alone. All this, occurring within a Romantic context glorifying the imagination, provided ample grounds for numinous conjecture, even among intellectuals.

Nowhere is numinousness more in evidence than in Delsartism itself, the most famous elocutionary system of America's nineteenth century. When the Delsartians featured, as they occasionally did, the performance of literature, they relied mainly on one's intuition for understanding the selection. It might be claimed that at least this emphasis on the body amounted to a training of the senses and was thus, like Austin's system, an emphasis however ludicrous on the physical in literary study. After all, a Delsartean premise, similar to Austin's, was that the outward assumption of the stance and gestures of emotion aroused their corresponding inner state, both in the performer and in the audience. Thus, its theory of communication did indeed make the body central as an entree to the "heart" and "soul." But the study of literature was far from the Delsarteans' sole or even chief aim. On the contrary, the Delsartians had the broadest of all aims: Monroe, for example, in a moment of enthusiasm exclaimed that Delsartism offered "the key to the universe."¹⁶

Francois Delsarte (1811–71) was a Parisian teacher of vocal music and acting, who never saw America, where his elocutionary system was to have its greatest impact. His system was brought to our shores by his student, the American actor Steele Mackaye (1842–94). Started by men, this system—like most of the unpublished, classroom, tutoring, and performance activity of the elocutionary movement generally—was promulgated largely by women.¹⁷ So too, for that matter, was spiritualism.¹⁸ Chief among these women was the American actress and teacher Genevieve Stebbins (1857–ca. 1915), who for a while was a member of Monroe's faculty. Her career was not atypical of elocutionists, who not only appeared in public performances but often served as itinerant teachers, set up private practice,

¹⁶The story is told by Percy MacKaye, *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye*. . . (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927), I. 190. Ruyter (*Cultivation of Body*, cited in n. 4 above) more calmly remarks (p. 66), Delsartism "could be used as either life training or art training."

¹⁷"Of the teachers and performers on whom information has been collected, about 85 percent are women," Ruyter, *Cultivation of Body*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 59.

¹⁸Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, cited in n. 15 above, pp. 27, 35.

founded their own schools, or joined established faculties.¹⁹ Stebbins used a title for one of her books that bares the heart of Delsartism: *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics: A Complete System of Psychological, Aesthetic and Physical Culture* (1893). The system was predominately physical, “action” in the modern sense, the specialized counterpart of “pronunciation”—neither of which alone comprised the whole of rhetorical delivery. For that matter, pronunciation, spoken language, had little to do with Delsartism. The master himself had said, “Gesture corresponds to the soul, to the heart, language to the life, to the thought, to the mind. The life and the mind being subordinate to the heart, to the soul, gesture is the chief organic agent.”²⁰ Posturing, efficient use of bodily gesture and movement seemed the entire point, as illustrated in the movie by Hermione Gingold’s ladies posing like figures on Grecian urns. As Stebbins wrote, “The ancient Greek has spoken to us through the genius of his art, and revealed the laws of expression, as he understood them, in images of lifeless stone.”²¹ In addition to urn- or statue-posing, silent recreations of famous paintings—especially, for Stebbins, those inspired in the Renaissance by ancient Greek art—were encouraged by the Delsarte system. Begun in France by a teacher of singing and acting, in American education the system had most bearing on the largely silent disciplines and arts of gymnastics, physical education, and modern dance. As *The New York Times* remarked in a report on the “first annual convention of elocutionists,” on July 3, 1892, when “the common mind” observes a Delsartean performance, whether in a play or in a reading by an “elocutionist,” it “observes nothing in it but a sort of superior calisthenics.”

Not surprisingly, Delsartism was right at home among the spiritualists. Delsarte was an ardent Trinitarian, dividing all parts of his system into threes, “a universal formula which he applied to all sciences, to all things possible.”²² Stebbins was herself a visionary

¹⁹A comprehensive summary of Stebbins’s life is Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter’s “The Intellectual World of Genevieve Stebbins,” *Dance Chronicle*, XL3 (1988), 381–97. See also Donald K. Smith, “Origin and Development of Departments of Speech,” in Wallace, ed., *History*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 452.

²⁰In *The Delsarte System of Oratory* (New York: E. S. Werner, 1893), p. 465. In the same book, Delsarte’s student, L’Abbe’ Delaumosne, put the matter precisely: “Speech is inferior to gesture, because it corresponds to the phenomena of mind; gesture is the agent of the heart, it is the persuasive agent” (p. 48).

²¹Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression* (New York: E. S. Werner, 1902), p. 370. The book offers 32 pictures of Greek statues.

²²Ruyter, *Cultivation of Body*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 77.

and spiritualist who aimed her thought and practice toward “ultimate truth”²³ and sought goals that went beyond entertainment and speech skills. Her book, *The Quest of the Spirit* (n.d.)—which she claims only to have edited and arranged since it was actually written by an anonymous “Pilgrim of the Way”—illuminates principles motivating the training she offered: “Time: Space: Movement: Form: these are the cardinal features of the eternal reality.” The only hermeneutic offered is spiritualized and intuitive: the sense of being grabbed by “an unpersonified something,” which occurs when “you have entered the mystic river—have bathed in the flowing waters of reality—and in a flash-light of subliminal awareness have grasped the meaning of Life” (p. 157). Thus, ostensibly far removed from the interests of literary study, the swirling mysticism of nineteenth century spiritualism provided one kind of very clear answer to questions about the purpose of literary study, as well as a hermeneutics that verged on the ecstatic.

Toward the close of the nineteenth century, just as Delsartism was reaching its apogee and was mainly what passed for elocution in the popular mind, another version, or realignment, of elocution came to the fore. This one laid the basis for a clear break with the dominant system and a clear move into literary study. Oftentimes it called itself, as Delsartism had done (as indeed almost any version of anything claiming to offer something different) “new.”²⁴ This one, however, was as old as it was for its times new: it returned elocution to some of its original aims while absorbing the insights of the increasingly popular subject of psychology. If spiritualism was a Victorian obsession, psychology eventually surpassed it among intellectuals, intrigued as they were by psychologists’ efforts to scientize matters which had received their “earliest systematic discussion” in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*²⁵ but which had been relegated to philosophy or even, as in the field of elocution, to a kind of pseudo-scientific classifying of emotions. Psychology, thanks to the innovative work of Wilhelm Wundt in 1879, became a matter not simply for speculation but for laboratory study. Given a newly burnished aura of “science,” the study grew and provided new tools for analyzing experience, whether in a performance or in a text. Psychology seems a natural

²³Ruyter, “Intellectual World,” cited in n. 19 above, p. 388.

²⁴E.g., S. S. Hamill, *New Science of Elocution*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1886; first pub. 1873), or Robert Kidd, *New Elocution and Vocal Culture* (Cincinnati, 1883).

²⁵George A. Kennedy, *Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 122.

cohort of all of rhetoric including elocution since the emotions of speaker and audience can be central. In the simplest versions of elocution, literary analysis often involved little more than identifying the major emotions in the selection, and performance little more than assuming what the elocutionist took to be their appropriate outward expression.²⁶ But later theories of elocution made the study of the various “passions” increasingly systematic at a time when more and more of these elocutionists were giving increased attention to the serious study of literary texts. Indeed, psychology seemed to displace whatever remnants of spiritualism remained among elocutionists. For it must also be true that, with the rise of psychology as science in Germany and the United States in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the hearing of voices might appear more a sign of mental disorder than evidence of the spirit world.

E. N. Kirby's *Public Speaking and Reading: a Treatise on Delivery According to the Principles of the New Elocution* (1896) is an interesting case in point, for as a “treatise” on rhetorical “delivery” it purports to return to the original purpose of elocution. The principles he offers, Kirby claims, are new in emphasizing (re-emphasizing would be more accurate) a conversational style of delivery and a concentration on meaning as the basis for effective delivery. (The principles only rephrase those offered by Sheridan in the preceding century.) In place of the old difference between “natural” and “mechanical,” Kirby prefers the more psychological terms “subjective” and “objective,” the former insisting on discourse that is “created or re-created at the point of delivery” (p. 14), the latter attempting to achieve similar goals through focusing less on the meaning of the discourse and more on the elements of its delivery (p. 20). Kirby doesn't exactly ignore the latter. But he gives considerable attention to the former, through such matters as the analysis of ideas in a sentence and what he calls “*the differentiation of parts as determined by the thought process*” (p. 39). Offering little distinction between the analysis of a speech and the analysis of a poem, the “new elocution” for this author—who is identified as “formerly instructor in elocution in Harvard and professor of elocution and oratory in Boston University”—makes reading aloud something of an exercise in the training of a public speaker and thereby, as noted, seems to restore some of the original purpose of the elocutionary movement. Finally, Kirby's book is almost as replete

²⁶Clearer examples are books like Hamill's, both editions of which capitalize on the popularity of the word *science* in their titles and simply classify selections according to their chief “passions” or recommended expressive techniques.

in the techniques of textual analysis as in the elements of speech: the sense of the whole text, the logical relations of sentence elements, the meaning of words, the ellipses, the suggested or implicit ideas, and of course the various emotions. In sum, "logical analysis" in order to give full attention to what Kirby calls "the mental content of the language" (p. 34) is the prime requisite, whether one is speaking in public or reading aloud.

Kirby's book has drawn little attention through the years. I find it important, however, as marking a transition. As a work in elocution, it not only abandons Delsartism but challenges the "natural" approach to provide more extensive means of analyzing the text—all this while restoring some of the integrity of rhetoric before its renewed dispersal among academic departments in the succeeding century. Better, it reveals some of the context wherein the disciplines of speech and English were eventually to separate and define or re-define themselves as academic specialties. Rhetoric Kirby identifies with public speaking, a subject that includes not only elocution, or the principles of delivery, but also composition (p. 13). Having said that, he then all but drops the term *rhetoric* from his book, preferring to think of it, in the customary manner, as the art of composing discourse, an art that in Kirby's view was necessarily allied (as it had been since Quintilian) with close textual analysis and oral delivery. Two decades later anything having to do with orality was relegated to departments of speech and four decades later New Critics reinvented textual analysis for students of literature.

Kirby announces that he has developed his ideas about delivery "according to the principles of accepted psychology" (p. 7). Thereby he reveals another causative factor in radical shifts of emphasis in the fields of rhetoric/composition and elocution. Advances in psychology, as suggested earlier, became a major influence on the work of those transitional figures who were making elocution primarily an approach to literary study: Curry, for example²⁷; or Emerson, whose principles are also based on an evolutionary pattern of the student's mental development²⁸; or, above all, Clark, who preferred "interpretation" to "elocution." Clark too taught that effective delivery depends upon one's concentration on meaning, a principle which

²⁷See his *Foundations of Expression* (Boston: The Expression Company, 1907), pp. 11–12.

²⁸See his *Evolution of Expression*, (Boston: Emerson College of Oratory, 1902); Robb (*Oral Interpretation*, cited in n. 4 above) has an excellent, brief discussion of both Curry and Emerson, pp. 165–73.

in the case of reading aloud places increased emphasis on acquiring the thought, or interpreting the printed page. Clark's major work is entitled *Interpretation of the Printed Page*, 1915: "the only basis for vocal expression," he states, "must lie in a thorough apprehension of the meaning" (p. 2). "*Elocution, or expression, or vocal interpretation, whatever it may be called, is not the goal of the reading lesson*" (p. 14). The goal is appreciation of literature. Close textual analysis coupled with oral reading constitute Clark's protocol.

In a sense, Clark, like Curry and Emerson, was more of an adjuster of a certain tradition than an innovator. The ancient idea that delivery is dependent upon and should work hand in hand with an analysis that is essentially grammatical had been a mode of instruction in American elocution, however minor in emphasis, at least since the time of Henry Mandeville (1804–58), whose *Elements of Reading and Oratory* continued to be published forty years after its first appearance, thirty years after his death. The enemy in that work, along with poor delivery, is the practice of merely skimming the page—as it is with Clark. What Clark adds to the mode of instruction is an analysis that extends beyond grammar and syntax and into such psychological matters as "connotation" and "emotion." Elocution, he insists, should be "the handmaid of literature" (p. 315), aimed at inspiring and revealing "the reader's joy in the text" (p. 317). He joins elocutionists like Curry and Emerson in realigning the goal of the study, which has now become literary appreciation.

It was elocution, Gerald Graff comments, referring to the field generally, "that brought students into close contact" with literature and "created a link between technical analysis and appreciation."²⁹ I have attempted to show that among the elocutionists of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the appreciation of literature became the stated goal and affected their means of achieving that goal. Within the first two decades of the twentieth century, however, departmental boundaries—those between the re-defining departments of English and the newly developing departments of speech—were beginning to fence off elocution from other courses in literature, further dispersing the old subject of rhetoric and ultimately though not initially insulating literary study in English departments from oral performance. By 1920, composition and literary study were mainly in well-established English departments; their oral dimensions were

²⁹Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 43.

mainly in neophyte speech departments. In spite of “their shared rhetorical traditions,” speech and English departments, as Stephen Mailloux notes, remained locked within “mutual isolation.”³⁰

If there is one nineteenth-century figure whose career exemplifies the major strands I have attempted to trace—the pre-departmentalized mixture of elocution and literary studies, the lingering spiritualism fad, the rise of psychology as a science—it is Hiram Corson (1828–1911). Not only did Corson view elocution as an approach to understanding and appreciating literature but he sought to restructure the study of literature itself along elocutionary lines. In so doing he clearly anticipated New Criticism decades in advance. His work will serve to summarize this first part of my discussion.

Corson was something of an autodidact. Having never enrolled in college, he was awarded the AM, LLD, and Litt. D degrees once he “became well known in the world of letters for his writings.”³¹ Among his published works are books on Chaucer, Browning, Shakespeare, and Milton, as well as on elocution, Anglo-Saxon and early English, and a translation of Juvenal’s satires. Serving the growing prominence of psychology, he edited his wife’s translation of Pierre Janet’s *Mental State of Hystericals* (1901); Janet was the theorist who gave psychology the word “subconscious.” Central in Corson’s career was his work as a professor of literature, whose longest tenure was at Cornell. A Corson contemporary who wrote a history of Cornell said about Corson’s teaching that he “presented literature mainly in its *essential* character, rather than in its historical” and that he wanted students to “attain a sympathetic appreciation of what is essential and intrinsic, before the adventitious features of literature—features due to time and place—be considered.”³² He was apparently well known as an oral interpreter of literature,³³ though how much he required his students to read aloud is unknown. More importantly, his rationale for reading aloud as a literary study is vigorously set forth in his theoretical works—and, as suggested by the quotation from the history

³⁰*Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2006), pp. 10–11.

³¹Obituary, *New York Times*, June 16, 1911.

³²Waterman Thomas Hewett, *Cornell University: A History*, Vol. Two (New York: University Publishing Society, 1905), p. 45.

³³The most vivid description of Corson as a person and classroom teacher is in Morris Bishop, *A History of Cornell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 115–18, some of which is echoed by Graff, *Professing Literature*, cited in n. 29 above, pp. 48–49. See also Robb, *Oral Interpretation*, cited in n. 4 above, pp. 178–80.

of Cornell, it is the rationale of early New Criticism: only knowledge of the text itself is “intrinsic”; context, such as history and biography, is “extrinsic.” Reading aloud preserves attention on the “intrinsic,” but for Corson as we shall see the protocol has more complex ends. Cornell’s modern Web site delivers this tribute: “The study of English came into its own with the arrival in 1870 of Hiram Corson.” That may be only a New Critical and highly departmentalized retrospective—which of course does not diminish the tribute.

After his first book, on Chaucer, Corson entered the fray as a writer on elocution, with his *An Elocutionary Manual* (1865), which is mainly a book of readings with no instruction or exercises in vocal skills (“the grand science of the human voice cannot be compressed into the limits of a nut shell,” p. 47). The book is introduced by two short essays, one calling for close reading of individual literary pieces “as distinct works of art” (p. 16) “essential to our spiritual life . . . organisms to be comprehended, not in their parts only, but in their totality” (p. 18), the other arguing for the use of the voice in creating “the fullest appreciation of a poem” (p. 34), the means whereby “[c]onscious analysis” blooms “into unconscious synthesis” (p. 47). The book was republished in 1867 under the title *An Essay on the Study of Literature and on Vocal Culture*; then in 1875 (during Corson’s early years at Cornell) it was published again under its original title.³⁴ The changes in titles, particularly when one realizes that there were no changes in content over the decade, seem to reveal that a few decades before elocution began to fall into disrepute there was an increasing public acceptance of the alliance of elocution with literary study (at least so far as marketing was concerned). Later Curry, among theorists advocating the alliance of elocution and literary study, quotes Corson approvingly. Not surprisingly, both theorists were entranced with St. Paul’s observation that “the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.”³⁵ Neither Curry nor Corson, however, believed that

³⁴But whereas the original was subtitled *Consisting of Choice Selections from English and American literature, adapted to every variety of vocal expression: designed for the higher classes in schools and seminaries, and for private and school reading: with an introductory essay on the study of literature, and vocal culture*, the final republishing was subtitled *With an Introductory Essay on the Study of Literature, and on Vocal Culture in its relation to an Aesthetic Appreciation of Poetry*. The difference may partly arise not so much from the author’s increased clarity as from his confidence of purpose.

³⁵Curry, *The Province of Expression* (Boston: School of Expression, 1891), pp. 70, 25, 123; Corson, *Aims* (to be discussed later), p. 16—a similar passage occurs in his *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning’s Poetry* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1900), p. 142.

“thinking-the-thought” was alone sufficient for effective delivery; both believed that some training in vocal skills would be useful; at the same time both believed that literature itself had deeply spiritual dimensions. *Spirit* is a word that can be vaguely used, then as well as now. Corson used it not vaguely but circumspectly in his early works. His later works reveal—and this is a matter seldom incorporated into studies of his career³⁶—that spiritualism was a motivating force throughout his life.

Toward the end of his career at Cornell, Corson published two theoretical books which expand ideas set forth in his elocutionary manual. *The Aims of Literary Study* (1894) offers its major premise early by reprinting a commencement address Corson had delivered at the Ogontz School³⁷: “What Does, what Knows, what Is,” the title (and capitalization) derived from the “trinal unity” of man’s soul as described in Browning’s *A Death in the Desert*, in which Browning modifies the Aristotelian doctrine of the three souls (the vegetative, animal, and rational). In the poem, the animal soul incorporates the vegetative and is “What Does”; the rational “Knows”; and beyond these is our truly immortal component which “Is.” The final soul “is a vast and mysterious domain of unconsciousness” which is “our true being,” Corson claims (p. 9). It is not through our intellect alone that we respond to literature, for literature is “the expression in letters of the spiritual, cooperating with the intellectual” (p. 24), or more simply “spiritualized thought.”³⁸ The intellect is important, but so too is the realization that literature is the “flesh” in which the immortal spirit appears (p. 71). Thus the case is set for an apprehension of literature—poetry being the prime (and easiest) example (p. 18)—through non-rational, “spiritual” means. We must get beyond historical and biographical approaches, beyond “German literary and philological scholarship” (pp. 42–43), even beyond “verbal and syntactical exegesis” (64). We must shun paraphrase (pp. 87, 91). Close, careful oral reading of the words themselves rather than lecturing is the best way for the professor to communicate literature; and his students should be examined by the same means (pp. 75, 99). After all,

³⁶See remarks by Donald E. Hargis, “Hiram Corson and Oral Interpretation,” *Western Speech*, 39.1: 39, 49.

³⁷Originally a “female seminary,” the Ogontz School (1850–1950) is now Penn State Abington

³⁸The simple version of these three souls appears in a synopsis of Corson’s lecture delivered before the American Society for the Improvement of Speech, January 1896, and printed in *Werner’s Magazine*, XVIII (1896). 378–79. The lecture summarizes the central ideas of Corson’s *Voice and Spiritual Education*.

"the *main* object of vocalization is to exhibit the spiritual coefficient, which is indefinite to the intellect, and needs to be vocally rendered as much as a musical composition needs to be vocally or instrumentally rendered" (pp. 119–20). Corson concludes by reprinting his advice on vocal skills which had appeared in his elocutionary manual of 1865 (pp. 137–43), a significant advertence so far as the reputation of elocution is concerned; Corson doesn't abjure the old elocution, he is simply wary of its aims.

So far as the aims of literary study itself are concerned, Corson spells them out more clearly in the second theoretical work, published the following year, *The Voice and Spiritual Education* (1896). Disclaiming any effort "to impart elocutionary instruction" (p. 5), Corson again acknowledges its importance—but urges that we stay away from the Delsarteans (p. 130). Again, he disparages the usual classroom approaches to literature and calls for "interpretative reading" (p. 37). Vocalization is of "prime importance" (p. 43). "In the creation of every great work of genius, a large degree of unconscious might enters" (p. 66), that third component of our souls which inhabits great literature and heightens the very purpose of literary study: "spiritual life" (p. 123), the quality linking man "with the permanent, the eternal" (p. 132). In short, education, literary and otherwise, should lead us to the apprehension of "the highest truths, truths which are beyond the reach of the discourse of reason" (p. 135). Corson concludes the argument in praise of Shakespeare, who (like himself?) was a product of no university but whose "vitality of soul" led him to acquire a "wisdom inaccessible to mere learning and intellectual enlightenment," probably thanks to his mother, "who initiated him into the mysteries of the spirit." (p. 181).

As will be apparent to those of us brought up on New Criticism, several features of Corson's arguments anticipate the coming revolution: a rejection of the usual philological, historical, and biographical approaches; the use of poetry as the main exemplar of all literature; the warning about the insufficiency of paraphrase; the stress on reading "the poem" in its totality. Corson, as Graff so vividly puts it, was among those who attempted "to disencumber literature from methodology and superfluous information—rather the way evangelical ministers had tried to free the holy spirit from the mediation of church and dogma."³⁹ Belonging in that group, I would insist, are those other latter-day elocutionists whose work in this regard, however idiosyncratic and at times flighty, deserves recognition. That

³⁹Graff, *Professing Literature*, cited in n. 29 above, p. 86.

said, a couple of general questions remain, provoked by ideas about vocalizing literature, questions which Corson and New Critics alike grappled with. If—as so many latter-day elocutionists and virtually all New Critics proclaimed—literature isn't for entertainment merely—what is it and why study it?

Corson's answer to those questions (we shall examine the New Critics later) center on the spirit, a topic he ultimately treated with some specificity. Corson, like many of the elocutionists, has little hesitation adverting to Christian doctrines about the soul or the man-God Christ and his teachings (*Aims*, e.g., pp. 15, 18, 72). But any mention of the spirit in the nineteenth century seems inevitably to bring echoes of spiritualism. And of Corson's own spiritualism we have ample evidence: *Spirit Messages with an Introductory Essay on Spiritual Vitality*, published in the year of Corson's death, 1911. The book featured messages collected from a Spirit Band assembled in the other world by his wife soon after her death in 1901. The messages were accessed through a medium holding séances between September 9 and October 1, 1910, and taken down verbatim by Corson himself. Members of the Band included, besides Mrs. Corson, the Brownings, Tennyson, Walt Whitman, Longfellow, Hawthorne, Gladstone, Phillips Brooks, among others. Corson's foreword suggests his long involvement with spiritualism, as does the preface written by his dutiful son, who published this book to obey his dying father's wishes. The book, says Eugene R. Corson, "is the legacy of an old man," who in his youth was aware of unseen presences (p. 1) and who apparently wrote something on spiritualism as early as 1874 (p. 5).⁴⁰

"Spiritual vitality," which is Corson's subject in his introduction to *Spirit Messages*, is exactly that aspect of our being which responds to and is awakened by great literature, as he has already told us in several of his previous books. "All great creative poets . . . have a sense of their kinship with the universal spirit by reason of their exceptional spiritual vitality: they are born pantheists" (p. 17). Thus, not surprisingly, "an indispensable requisite of a teacher of literature is a highly cultivated voice, a voice, too, whose intonation (the

⁴⁰And in the following year was visited by Mme Blavatsky (p. 179 note; see also Marion Meade, *Madame Blavatsky* [New York: Putnam, 1980], pp. 144, 152–56). Corson's long involvement with spiritualism also controverts the suggestion, in both Morris (p. 118) and Graff, *Professing Literature* (cited in n. 29 above, p. 49) that Corson in taking up spiritualism went off the deep end late in life. On the contrary he was a "well-known spiritualist" at least four decades before his death; see Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky . . .* (New York: Putnam, 1993), pp. 117, 153–55.

choral part of an interpretative voice) should be such as to evoke a response of his students to the spiritual element of the poem he is reading, along with the articulating thought which is received by their intellects" (p. 23). Therein lies the kernel of Corson's teachings on the union of elocution and the nature of literature, and the necessity of the former in fully grasping the latter. Literature is, after all, we are told once more, "spiritualized thought" (p. 18), a voice that speaks to our true being—our immortal being, our spirit. That we are spiritual beings is evidenced by spirit visitations, like those reported in the book we are now reading. Moreover, since these visitations affirm that one's individual identity remains after death,⁴¹ such affirmation only lends urgency to the necessity of spiritual awakening through great literature in this life. The professor's duty is thus as urgent and specific as, to echo Graf's metaphor, any evangelical minister's.

Corson's work is the ne plus ultra of his line, uniting elocution with literary study on the one hand and spiritualism with literary ontology on the other. Perhaps because spiritualism inhered in his *weltanschauung* he was in retrospect more direct and specific than his contemporaries when it came to talking about the nature of literature and the purpose its study fulfills. Other latter-day elocutionists with literary interests remained somewhat vague about ontology, to cite three major ones: Curry, Emerson, and Clark. Curry, thinking of literature in terms of the voice itself, insists that both are capable of expressing "the highest aspirations and deepest realizations of the human heart." Thus for Curry, the study of literature, of all art for that matter, including "expression," is crucial in achieving the goal of education generally, which is the development of our "creative faculties."⁴² Emerson, with his evolutionary paradigm for education, sounds like Curry: literature offers "truth and beauty," and the purpose of reading it aloud to others is to "enrich" the student's life as well as "other lives by cultivating the power of expressing the glories which are open to his vision."⁴³ Clark, who consistently pre-

⁴¹E.g., Whitman is still writing poetry (p. 69), and Tennyson is curious about his successor's merit (p. 166). One's inward character apparently does not change; see also p. 223.

⁴²S. S. Curry, *Mind and Voice; Principles and Methods in Vocal Training* (Boston, 1895), p. 446. The second quotation is from Curry's *The Province of Expression: A Search for Principles underlying adequate methods of developing Dramatic and Oratoric Delivery*, (Boston: Expression, 1891), p. 407.

⁴³Charles Wesley Emerson, *Evolution of Expression, Part One* (Boston: The Barta Press, 1905), p. 13.

ferred *interpretation* to *elocution*, insists that better apprehension of the printed page leads to better citizenship, better creativity, and even a better sense of “what is going on.” So far as literature specifically is concerned: “We must find time and means to present literature for what it is, not as history, not as biography, not as composition, nor philology, nor histology, nor—nor—nor anything but the beautiful.”⁴⁴ Thus, four views of literary ontology, each aligned with the theorist’s insistence on a close, careful reading of the poem, or literary text, in its totality and each aligned, too, with what the theorist imagines the role of the voice might be in apprehending and conveying, to oneself or to others, the nature of that text. Corson’s spiritualism allowed him, eventually at least, to rise (if not soar) above the vague and platitudinous.

NEW CRITICISM

In 1948 William Elton suggested that the origins of New Criticism may actually lie in the work of Coleridge and Bentham. The suggestion is disputable. Less so is his characterization of the movement as “The Revolution of the Text.”⁴⁵ Revolution it was, a clear break with previous critical approaches and doctrines in literary education. And it was, above all, text-centered. Further, as with elocution, its greatest influence was on and through pedagogy.

When we think of New Criticism today, Mark Jancovich has noted, now that its reforms are old-hat, we think of a couple of matters: the “practice of close reading” and the idea that the individual text is “an objective, self-sufficient object.”⁴⁶ That is, we think of a certain hermeneutics and a certain ontology. As I have tried to show, by the time the New Critics arrived on the scene similar considerations of both matters were well underway in elocution. But most New Critics formally ignored elocution, probably for politically astute reasons. In the first decades of the twentieth century elocution was falling rapidly from favor in the academic world; even the elocu-

⁴⁴Clark’s full title is indicative of his interest and intention: *Interpretation of the Printed Page: for those who would learn to interpret literature silently or through the medium of the voice* (Chicago: Row, Peterson, 1915), the quoted passages are on pp. 11–12, and 16.

⁴⁵*A Guide to the New Criticism* (Chicago: The Modern Poetry Association, 1948), p. 3.

⁴⁶*The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 5.

tionary avant garde, such as Corson, Curry, Emerson, and Clark, had been retitled—as, respectively, Professor of Rhetoric and Literature, Dean of the School of Expression, President of Emerson College, and Professor of Public Speaking. Nonetheless, similarities remained between elocution and the coming New Criticism. New Criticism in effect raised close reading, or elocutionary hermeneutics, to a higher, more serious level. And so far as literary ontology was concerned, there was significant vagueness in both elocution and New Criticism about what literature is, how it exists, what purpose it serves, in spite of the commonsensical idea that analysis, hermeneutics, should accord with nature, ontology.

Though its origins may be a little murky, the subject of New Criticism and its major theorists is surely less esoteric for the modern reader than the subject of elocution. One famous and largely recognized theorist of New Criticism was the Cambridge lecturer I. A. Richards, whose books *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925) and *Practical Criticism* (1930) reached our shores soon after their publication. In America some historians put the revolution earlier, however, with the lecture delivered by Joel Spingarn at Columbia University in 1910 under the title “The New Criticism.” Whereas Richards was a foremost proponent of close, textual reading and, with C. K. Ogden, of the union of language studies and psychology, Spingarn centered more on ontology, raising his concerns continuously into the very nature of beauty. Spingarn’s battle was joined vigorously in the following decade under the banner of “aesthetics,”⁴⁷ when theorists, including Richards at times, sought to articulate principles of art generally: e.g. form and content are inseparable; the difference between the kinds of art is the medium of each (change the medium, some insisted, and you change the meaning); the artist intends not to teach, please, or move, but only to create art; the work of art is its only excuse for being (some joined Archibald MacLeish in his famous proclamation that a poem should not “mean/ But be”); some went even farther and claimed that all art aspires to the condition of music.

Carried to their extreme, aesthetic principles hardened into a formalism that was far removed from every “extrinsic” consideration. Aesthetic emotion, theorists insisted, is inchoate; art gives it form; and it is that form which moves art into the condition of music, removing performance and response from composer and his

⁴⁷The banner had been raised earlier, of course. See, e.g., John P. Fruit, “A Plea for the study of Literature from the aesthetic Standpoint,” *PMLA* 6 (1891): 29–40.

time. Thus, T. S. Eliot thought of art as an escape from personality, with an emotion that is impersonal; Ramon Fernandez wrote of the artist's ego as an imaginary being; Benedetto Croce emphasized form not uniformity in his "unity in variety"; George Santayana insisted upon the timelessness of beauty; I. A. Richards said that poetry contained only "pseudo-statements."⁴⁸ In sum, the very nature of art, its ontology or mode of existence, lay in its form—a clear difference from Corson's "spirit," a specificity beyond Curry's heartfelt "aspirations," a new way of expressing Emerson's "truth and beauty," or Clark's "the beautiful"—and, in its extreme, a denial of context, along with most of rhetoric. The formalist idea was perhaps better captured in a comparison not with music but with an object, as in the title Cleanth Brooks used for his "studies in the structure of poetry," *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), a metaphor John Donne had used for sonnets three hundred years ago. But the idea of form, which may or may not be silent and conceptual, brought in its own share of problems, and Brooks as we shall see was himself no narrow aesthetician.

Too, the formalism of I. A. Richards shows early cracks, perhaps because unlike militant aestheticians he brought his work down from the level of theory to the level of practical criticism, analyzing what the poem either means or does. Like most aestheticians, militant and otherwise, and New Critics he was mainly concerned with poetry, which he characterized as an experience which has been given order and coherence. But he also insisted that this is an experience which requires us "to give the words their full imagined sound and body" while—perhaps nodding in the direction of narrower aestheticians—avoiding an "over-extension of the thought in it." The words could have been spoken by a latter-day elocutionist rationalizing his art, whereas it is doubtful that earlier elocutionists who kept their eyes on public performance or self-improvement, would have characterized this experience as "its own justification."⁴⁹

⁴⁸Edwin Berry Burgum edited a splendid collection of essays which survey the first two decades' development of "Modern Aesthetics and Literary Criticism" (his subtitle) under the general title of *The New Criticism* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1930). Spingarn's lecture, Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent," Fernandez's "Autobiography and the Novel," Croce's "Intuition and Art," Santayana's "The Nature of Beauty," are the essays to which I refer, and all can be found in Burgum's book. Begum notes that most of the initial work in the New Criticism was accomplished by "foreign authors" (p. vii).

⁴⁹Burgum, ed., *The New Criticism*, cited in n. 48 above, pp. 140, 142, 152. The essays I cite are "The Poetic Experience" and "Poetry and Beliefs."

New Criticism made its biggest splash in 1936 when it was introduced into the university classroom where beginning students were successfully taught close textual reading, a supposedly new way of understanding literature as literature. In that year a revolutionary textbook appeared, called modestly but significantly *An Approach to Literature*. The significance lay in what it took literature to be: literature is not history, philosophy, or biography but somehow an uniquely artistic mode of discourse. The book anthologized fiction, poetry, essays, and drama; and when the editors considered pieces of historical, philosophical, or biographical writings, these too were studied as if they were pieces of literary art. The critical apparatus was threefold: very brief, almost attenuated discussions about the nature of literature; dates of the poets' lives—no biography of authors, no history of their times, and only the poets are dated, as if poetry presents, as it does, special problems in dealing with the "extrinsic" and "intrinsic"; and, third, analytical questions guiding the students' explorations of individual texts. In sum, it appeared that it was primarily the hermeneutics—close textual analysis aimed at uncovering the special qualities of the selections and not theoretical speculation—which taught students the major lessons about what literature is. The book was unlike any literary anthology, outside the field of elocution, which had appeared. But, however much certain later elocutionists had switched their main interests to literary study, none published an anthology/textbook as critically revolutionary or as influential as *An Approach to Literature* by three Louisiana State University colleagues: Cleanth Brooks, John Thibault Purser, and Robert Penn Warren.

The nature and purpose of their critical approach was more fully set out two years later, in 1938, with Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. A poem is, of course, the most manageable text for the kind of analysis propounded by the New Critics and, as elocutionists had also found, the most discussable. A poem can usually be laid out on the page (like a patient etherized on a table), examined in detail, reconstructed and held in the mind. It is, moreover, the essence of what literature is in the New Critical view, for a good poem has a coherence that challenges the temptation to separate form from content, to say nothing of the temptation to search the "extrinsic" for answers about meaning. (So Brooks, Purser, and Warren had found in the earlier work, when they centered on Browning's poem *Porphyria's Lover* in their general introduction to literature.) It might appear, then, that it is coherence, an almost self-sufficient coherence, and not eloquence or beauty or the best that has been thought and said, which makes literature literature. However, New Critical literary ontology is, as we shall see, more complex and more variable. A fiction book by Brooks and Warren followed in 1943, and one on drama (compiled

by Brooks and Robert B. Heilman) in 1945—a total of four books in all which created something of a critical revolution in the classroom, one with long lasting effects.⁵⁰

Performative concepts of character and tone—that is, of the speaker *in* the poem—pervade the analytical work in all the books. But it is in the poetry book where Brooks and Warren are clearest about their critical approach and where they move closest to elocution. Their doctrine, as set forth in a letter to the teacher in 1938 is threefold:

1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem
2. The treatment should be concrete and inductive.
3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation.⁵¹

The poem, in short, is to be read as nothing other than a poem. It is to be analyzed word by word. Even though unity is to be prized, quality does not depend on form alone. The most intriguing question is, of course, posed by the first principle. What does it mean to read a poem as a poem? Answers to that question would seem to justify the other principles. “Poetry is a form of speech, or discourse, written or spoken” (p. xxxiii). The poet’s impulse is “the impulse to communicate feeling, attitudes and interpretations” (p. xl). Every poem has a “dramatic aspect” (p. liv). “Even when we read poetry or prose silently if we are trained and sensitive readers, we are aware sub-vocally of the rhythm and texture of the language and are affected by them” (p. 124). In sum, orality pervades the approach. So does rhetoric. As Mark Royden Winchell has remarked concerning the introduction to *Understanding Poetry*:

One might easily come away from this introduction thinking of poetry as language skillfully used to express an attitude about experience. That, of course, is more nearly a definition of rhetoric than of poetry. In a sense, Brooks and Warren see poetry as a kind of rhetoric—one based on dramatic tension rather than on didactic assertion or appeals to pathos (although both of these latter elements appear in many good poems).⁵²

⁵⁰H. R. Swanson has an interesting personal essay on this point, “The Heritage of the New Criticism,” *College English* 41 (1979), pp. 412–22.

⁵¹I have used the 1950 edition, which marks the revisions. In that edition the quoted passage, unrevised, occurs on p. xv.

⁵²*Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 158.

There are other ways in which their view of poetry verges on rhetoric—and thereby on elocution as well. Throughout the critical essays and the analytical questions the poem is spoken of as if it were itself an “experience,” something to be sensed, which has been given “unity” through its fusion of form and content. It is not until we approach the end of the poetry book that our role as readers is named: “we are critics and appreciators” (p. 591). Nothing which has been said in this book would be alien to a latter-day elocutionist. The words “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” as used by Brooks and Warren to mark a difference between primary analysis, such as close reading of the text, and secondary, such as bringing to our aid such minimal biographical or historical information which might be required (but which forever remains “extrinsic”), would also not be alien. The difference seems to lie in the fact that these classroom New Critics are litterateurs, and approach their work as such; they are not teachers of speech or oral delivery, which remained part of the tasks of most elocutionists, a major part for the early ones. But let us consider the contrast with those early elocutionists, a contrast that brings to the fore a similarity between the New Critics and the *later* elocutionists. For example, consider again the Rev. Gilbert Austin’s approach to Gray’s *Elegy*. Brooks and Warren pose five analytical questions about that poem, and in their fifth one they observe: “The poem makes a number of general statements about life. Are these statements insisted upon in isolation? Or do they grow out of the dramatic context of the poem?” (p. 379). “Dramatic context” is the very heart of elocution even for Austin, whose stated interest was in “rhetorical delivery.” Brooks’ and Warren’s interest, by contrast, is in the poem itself. Nonetheless, both views visualize the speaking of the poem as if it were “discourse,” or “a form of speech.” And that view with its focus on the dramatic nature of the literary experience draws the later elocutionists—those who placed literary interpretation above public performance—very close to the New Critics.

“Dramatic context” (who is speaking in the poem and to whom) provokes a question about rhetoric’s defining element, the audience, in this case not only the audience *in* the poem but *of* the poem: is it a universal one (with “statements insisted upon in isolation”), or is it aimed at specific hearers and maybe locked into a time and place? The answer to that question provides yet another set of parallels between elocutionists and New Critics. Elocutionists like Austin or the Delsarteans considered simply a universal audience: gestures apply to all alike. Other elocutionists, particularly those who had public performance as their goal valued audience adaptation not only in manner of delivery but also in deciding which selection or which piece of a selection should be performed for which audience. Still

other elocutionists, particularly the later ones, who emphasized literary understanding through reading aloud, paid minimal attention to the oral reader's audience. Among the New Critics the idea of audience was no less problematic and variable. At the extreme were the aestheticians and those who fancied themselves formalist in their approach, who rejected the very idea of audience and, e.g., found the poem offering "pseudo-statements." Somewhat more moderate in their approach were the Brooks and Warren brand of New Critics, for whom audience considerations necessarily play a role in the dramatic (or, in Kenneth Burke's dramatic) analysis, as one probes the speaking situation and considers a possible audience *in* the poem. But moderation, as revolutionaries always insist, leaves the door open to what has been banished. For even though the moderate strand of New Criticism tended to reduce rhetoric simply to style, the old *elocutio*, rhetorical matters with their baggage of audience considerations have a way of creeping back in. Particularly is this true, as suggested earlier, in the matter of ontology. Let us take a closer look at the matter.

Three of the most influential of American New Critics formed an all but tight band in education and outlook. All three were Southerners, a regional basis for what Jancovich calls their "cultural politics": they viewed literature, he argues, as a means of curing the effects of industrial capitalism. If so, their view might be seen as a counterpart of Corson's curious dogmatism; at least it places them even farther outside hard-nosed formalism. Cleanth Brooks (1906–94) graduated from Vanderbilt in 1928 and attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in 1931. He taught at LSU, as did Robert Penn Warren, and then served for many years at Yale as Gray Professor of Rhetoric,⁵³ where he became emeritus in 1975. Robert Penn Warren also attended Vanderbilt, graduating in 1925, and attended Oxford as Rhodes Scholar in 1930. Distinguished as critic and professor, he is primarily identified these days as a novelist (Pulitzer prize in 1947) and poet (Pulitzer prizes in 1958 and 1979). Both Brooks and Warren were at Oxford at a time when the critical ideas of I. A. Richards were becoming prominent and influential. At Vanderbilt, and for years thereafter, however, both were strongly and directly influenced by the man who was the fore-

⁵³The chair was endowed by Yale alumnus Neil Gray, and "[b]ecause Yale did not have a department in the specified field of rhetoric, it was up to the English department, now chaired by Louis Martz, to determine what to do with the money. Cleanth probably had been more concerned in more different ways with the uses of language than had anyone else in the department. Because he clearly deserved an endowed chair, he was named in 1961 to be Yale's first Gray Professor of Rhetoric" (Winchell, cited in n. 52 above, p. 304).

most theorist of New Criticism, John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974), considered by many the true founder of New Criticism, in America.⁵⁴

“I have failed to find a new critic with an ontological account of poetry,” wrote Ransom in 1941, several years after the appearance of the textbooks by Brooks and Warren.⁵⁵ What Ransom sought was an answer to the question, “In what world of discourse does it [poetry] have its existence?” And in part he posed his own answer:

As a thing of sounds it exists in the words; as a thing of meanings it exists in a world beyond the words. The heterogeneity is rather extreme. We recall the old puzzle, the debate on whether the poem resides in the physical words said or in the interpretation that is given them. But it exists in both at once . . . (p. 328).

The answer, however partial, could in its insistence upon “interpretation,” justify an oral rendering of the poem, as does the idea of a poem’s “dramatic situation”—a concept from Richards, which Ransom praises (pp. 61–62). But most students are surely less interested in ontology—the poem’s mode of existence—than in a closely, perhaps dangerously, related question, about the poem’s rationale or rather the rationale of studying it: what good is either the poem or its study? For Ransom, questions about ontology and rationale are best understood by posing a difference between poetic and scientific discourse: the latter offers statements which can be validated; the former offers “icons” which have no “consistent definitive reference” (p. 291) and, unlike scientific statements, “recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories” (p. 281), a world imperiled by modern culture. That a poem exists in “icons” seems to push its ontology toward formalism—but not very far.⁵⁶ That it serves as a kind of corrective puts it in the realm of the experiential—and even, perhaps, in the world of “cultural politics”—and rhetoric.

⁵⁴A succinct review of many of these observations can be found in Frank Kermode, *Cleanth Brooks and the Art of Reading Poetry* (University of London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 1998) and Robert Penn Warren, “A Conversation with Cleanth Brooks,” in Lewis P. Simpson, ed., *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), pp. 1–124.

⁵⁵*New Criticism* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), p. 281. Jancovich touches on several points where Richards and Ransom, including his later work, agree and disagree: see esp. pp. 41–42, 92, 106.

⁵⁶Ransom’s famous division of the poem into “structure,” or paraphrasable content, and “texture” impels his work in the other direction, even away from Brooks’ and Warren’s.

Brooks himself interviewed by Warren late in their careers offered a similar rationale: "The poet, it seems to me, is constantly relating the human predicament of his time to the universal qualities of human nature through all the ages."⁵⁷ Again, such statements might substantiate Jancovich's argument for the "cultural politics" of the New Critics. But in comparing these critics with elocutionists, one might also be tempted to suggest that New Critical statements about the purpose of literature—its recovery of an "original world" or, less atavistically, its universality—could be offered as at least remotely similar to the later elocutionists' attempts to articulate a purpose for literature, such as Corson's numinousness, his engagement with spirituality. But a longer lasting rationale in both camps, as I suggested earlier, came with the arrival of psychology. For an interest in psychology pervaded the cultural contexts of both movements. Not only did an interest in psychology seem to replace much of the elocutionists' dallying with spiritualism, I would also conjecture that its rise in prominence continually worked with other factors to enhance the idea that literature is a kind of experience.

As a consequence, what makes the period that stretches through elocution and into New Criticism an episode in the history of American rhetoric is its restoration of rhetorical analysis in literary study: who is speaking, to whom, how, and to what purpose, whether *in* or *of* the poem. "New Critics," states Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "approached all texts as rhetorical works insofar as they were strategic efforts to achieve particular ends, whether that end was to create an experience or to influence policy decisions."⁵⁸ That mode of analysis trained generations of students in both fields.⁵⁹

True, some of the most formalist among New Critics abjured rhetoric. However, the most pedagogical and influential New Critics, Brooks and Warren, published a textbook entitled *Modern Rhetoric* in 1949, which was prefaced in the following way:

⁵⁷Robert Penn Warren, "A Conversation with Cleanth Brooks," in Lewis P. Simpson, ed., *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), p. 10.

⁵⁸"Modern Criticism," in Thomas O. Sloane et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 503.

⁵⁹It might also be noted that it was from rhetoric that Brooks and Warren and other New Critics took the figure *irony* to name the tone, the aural tone, which they found pervasive in literature's dramatism, as that feature became systematized by the rhetorician Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic" approach in *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945).

The revived interest in “rhetorical” problems has, in most minds, been associated with reading rather than with writing. There has been a great effort to enrich the reader’s response to the texts of poetry, drama, and fiction. Yet one would expect this new interest in rhetorical problems to have some application, also, to the problems of writing. (p. xiii)

That final sentence can seem both poignant and ironic. The new Brooks and Warren book is for written composition, which was the major meaning of *rhetoric* in the preceding (nineteenth) century. The “problems” the authors refer to remain the same, whether one is composing discourse or analyzing literature: *rhetoric* is the name of the process whereby the elements of any discourse are put together, such as sound and sense, and the components of the dramatic situation. Although *Modern Rhetoric* centers more on *elocutio* in the old sense (style) than on “rhetorical problems” in their fullest sense, the prefacing statement quoted above is one of the clearest indications offered by these founders of New Criticism that their literary-analytical questions are rhetorical in nature. Further, these questions are predicated on a pedagogical assumption that incorporates something like the later elocution of Corson, et al.

“I’m not talking about elocution,” Robert Penn Warren said in an interview late in life, speaking of his “old-fashioned” education which regularly required reading poems aloud or memorizing them and reciting them:

Good or bad the poems may have been, but at least it was recognized that the poem existed as a verbal art. It wasn’t just something on a page; it was an *action* you took part in, an action that affected you, and affected your hearers. I’m not talking about elocution, about the way to render a poem dramatically, but about simply surrendering yourself to the possibilities of language, something as simple as that.⁶⁰

On the contrary, Warren *is* talking about elocution, the elocution of Corson, Curry, Clark, Emerson. He goes on to say that we don’t actually need to read the poem aloud if we are practiced enough to sense the poem as an “inner experience” (p. 303) because the “body naturally *wants* to participate in the thing and to get its share of the experience” (p. 304). Ransom, he points out, “almost never discussed poetry without reading it aloud” (p. 309). It seems patent

⁶⁰“Conversation with Warren” in Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, Mary Louise Weaks, eds., *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* (Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 302.

that reading aloud—the very kind of critical reading aloud the later elocutionists taught, not a dramatic rendering but an exploration of the text through surrendering oneself to it, giving the body a role in understanding, allowing delivery to be guided by, say, “thinking the thought”—was assumed in New Criticism. The matter is underscored by the interviewer, who comments

It seems to me that in the fourth edition of *Understanding Poetry* and in the fifth edition of *An Approach to Literature*, you and Mr. Brooks advise students to read poetry aloud more often and perhaps with more detailed advice than you had in the earlier editions.

WARREN: In the earlier editions we assumed that this was done. I assumed it because I had always done it myself. But in fact it was a real issue, you see; it was necessary to insist on it. . . . On principle I guess we were just not previously aware how much the oral reading of poetry had fallen off. (pp. 303–04)

It is tempting to cite the breaking away of “speech” from “English” as a causative factor. But the important point is that a certain New Critical assumption remains: because literature is “an inner experience” or “action” it induces physical responses, which can be realized through performance either actual or imagined. Literature as experience is the central idea.⁶¹ New Critical hermeneutics and ontology, of the Brooks and Warren stripe, are implicitly elocutionary, implicitly rhetorical.

The movies I mention at the first of this argument, those which give us glimpses of elocution, appeared at about the time that the newness of New Criticism was becoming passé, though it never quite faded from the academic scene as elocution has. New Criticism became established, and its rhetorical features were only enhanced by the rise of New Historicism and its attack on formalism and any approach prone to formalism. What about “rhetorical delivery”? If one Googles “elocution lessons,” almost a half million results could appear, many of them the same as the over a million and a half which might appear when “rhetorical delivery” is Googled. In sum, help, mostly through private practitioners outside academia, is apparently still available. And thus the dispersal of rhetoric continues. Again,

⁶¹In 1930 Clarence T. Simon argued from the standpoint of behavioral psychology that reading aloud has a decided advantage in the appreciation of literature because it involves more of the student’s physical being; “Appreciation in Reading,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* XVI (1930): 185–93. A later book-length study of the approach was offered by two professors of oral interpretation: Wallace Bacon and Robert Breen, *Literature as Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

the dispersal in academia which occurred in the second decade of the twentieth century, when “speech” as a discipline moved out of “English” and into its own department, may have conditioned if not limited the historical view of the early New Critics, for by the time they appeared on campus in English departments, the split was already two decades old. Nowadays in the wake of New Criticism the combination of criticism and reading aloud, which characterized the latter phases of elocution and had appeared in speech curricula as “oral interpretation,” is often taught under the title of “performance studies.”⁶²

“Oral performance,” Walter Ong argues, “favors not impartial investigation but contest.”⁶³ The opposition Ong sets up in his argument is between the agonistic traditions of rhetoric, which favored bardic or, even earlier, rhapsodic performances of poetry before live audiences often in contests, and New Criticism, whose conception of poetry he argues was that it is an aesthetic object which was neither created nor performed orally but written down by the poet in solitude and meant to be contemplated by the reader also in solitude. Obviously, Ong’s opposition ignores, first of all, such developments as the later stages of elocution. Elocutionists like Emerson, Curry, Clark, Corson employed oral performance precisely for “impartial investigation,” like an actor working up a part not necessarily to appear in public but primarily to find out about the part itself, finding the means to make himself or herself both speaker and audience *in* and *of* the poem. Ong’s opposition also slights the pervasive orality in New Criticism. The old rhetorical culture, as brilliantly described by Ong in several works of scholarship,⁶⁴ has indeed passed, taking with it instruction in Latin, schooling for males only, and ceremonial combativeness. But that’s not to say that rhetoric itself has passed. Nor is it to say that oral performance—even the idea of oral performance—and rhetorical analysis have no place in an experiential, New Critical study of literature.

⁶²“One characteristic of performance studies pedagogy is its emphasis on embodiment,” in Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Winmer, eds., *Teaching Performance Studies* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. 3. See also Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶³From *Rhetorical Culture to New Criticism: The Poem as a Closed Field*,” in Simpson, ed., *The Possibilities of Order*, cited in n. 54 above, p. 165.

⁶⁴E. g. *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971); *The Barbarian Within* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); and his masterful *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, cited in n. 6 above.