Matthew Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce*. Oxford: OUP, 2007. Pp. 302. £78. ISBN 0199593221.

Now six years old, awarded the Philip Leverhulme prize in the year of its publication, and with a paperback edition published in 2010, Matthew Bevis's *Art of Eloquence* will already be familiar to many readers of this review. The study is organised around four chapters, which focus in turn on the work of Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, and Joyce. Each writer is chosen for their political engagement: the poet-Lords Byron and Tennyson, the parliamentary reporter Dickens (who was invited to stand for Parliament in 1841 – an invitation which he flatly declined), and the politically invested Joyce, raised by a father who hero-worshipped Parnell and harboured parliamentary ambitions of his own. Bevis focuses his analyses on novels and poems, the necessary limitations of the study being to reformulate accepted binaries of speech and writing in genres that are traditionally read privately, rather than performed publicly.

The study's central aim is 'to calibrate the ways in which writers resisted a 'divorce' between literature and politics even as they attempted to formulate distinctions between aesthetic and instrumental languages in their work' (14). That Bevis cites Geoffrey Hill's collection *Speech! Speech!* as a gloss on the governing questions of the study, indicates from the opening pages that this is a monograph rooted in an appreciation for and close examination of the textual: 'Why and how | in these orations do I twist my text?' (14). When asking such questions of their own work, the four writers under examination are demonstrated to hold themselves accountable to an increasingly politicized public: 'Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, and Joyce were aware that a disinterested independence might shade into irresponsible indifference' (5). Bevis makes explicit, however, that the bringing together of the realms of oratory and poetry is not simply the result of historical happenstance. Rather, he convincingly argues for the extensive heritage of their coincidence in the classical art of rhetoric.

In the opening two chapters of the study, Bevis uses classical rhetorical terms as pivots around which close discussion of text manoeuvres: *actio* (Bevis's shorthand, 'the eloquence of action', provides an articulate gloss of the term) in Byron, and *kairos* (the opportune moment) in Dickens. This is not to suggest reductive or heavy-handed scholarship on Bevis's part. The final two chapters of the book strike a more suggestive relationship to the strictures of rhetoric; his chapter on Tennyson contemplates the rhetorical dimensions of the poet's use of repetition and rhyme, before exploring Joyce's 'calculated resistance to the classical emphasis on the three duties of the orator – *docere*, *movere*, *delectare*' (213: to inform, to move, and to delight).

For Romanticists, the chapter on Byron provides a fascinating evaluation of the poet's *oeuvre* as offering 'the most sustained poetic engagement with oratorical culture in the period' (32). Bevis covers an impressive range of poetic examples, from alliteration and the difficulties of vocal pronouncement in *Childe Harold*, to the possible (and plausible) legacy of Burkean political performativity in *The Corsair*, concluding with navigations of the double-tongued rhetoric of *Don Juan*. Bevis stresses the oratorical craftsmanship behind Byron's epic: '*Don Juan* is not all talk; it is talk transcribed, transfigured, and finessed' (62), and we are reminded at once of Coleridge's definition of poetry as 'the best words in their best order' and Tristram Shandy's verdict on 'writing being but a different word for conversation'. Given *Don Juan*'s 'conversational facility' (XV.155), the poet's ambivalence to parliamentary chit-chat, such as his critique of Lord Castlereagh's parliamentary gassings, is all the more remarkable:

> Bid Ireland's Londonderry's Marquess show
> His parts – of Speech; and, in the strange displays
> Of that odd string of words all in a row,
> Which none divine, and every one obeys,
> Perhaps you may pick out some queer no-meaning –
> Of that weak wordy harvest the sole gleaning. –
>
> (*DJ* IX.385-392)

Yet Byron's satirical sword is always sharpest when dissecting things closest to home. As Bevis indicates, the poet saw poetry and oratory as sister arts: '"both *ancients* and *moderns*, have declared, that the 2 pursuits are so nearly similar . . . he who excels in the one, would on application succeed in the other"' (31). Byron's declaration sits easily in a study, which at various points indicates that both poetry and oratory are, in essence, arts of making thought eloquent. Bevis's emphasis on the oratorical dimensions of the poetical holds particular resonance in the Romantic period – an era which is conventionally read as staging the transition between the aural traditions of poetry, to an exclusively private, silent, visual experience. For Romanticists, *The Art of Eloquence* demonstrates that it is time that we began to listen more carefully to what was being read.

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