Matti Hyvärinen

THE TROPES OF MR RHETORICAL TURN

John S. Nelson (1998): Tropes of Politics. Science, Theory, Rhetoric, Action. Madison and London. The University of Wisconsin Press. 291 pages.

John S. Nelson, more than anyone else, deserves the credit for launching and arguing for a "rhetorical turn" in political science. In addition to rhetoric, Nelson has been recognized in the wider field of political theory (see: *Tradition, Interpretation and Science, Political Theory in The American Academy*, 1986). These fields of rhetoric and theory meet elegantly in Nelson's extensive work on politics and films, politics and spy stories and so on. It has been characteristic of Nelson to have an impassioned interest, theoretically, politically and aesthetically, in widely consumed and influential products of (political) culture, instead of focusing on the highbrow, avant-garde side of the arts. However, you cannot see Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* solely as a "realist Western" (as critics in Finland typically put it) after reading Nelson's breath-taking analysis of the film. Nelson is probably one of the few academics who may warmly recommend John D. MacDonald as a good read.

As a veteran of the rhetorical turn, Nelson has not written an easy introduction to the rhetorics of politics. His new book, *Tropes of Poli-*

tics: Science, Theory, Rhetoric, Action, is both a thick intellectual summary of Nelson's work over the last decades, and a provocative new start for postmodernist and playful strategies of research and writing. Any solicitous reviewer will obviously be frustrated in the face of the richness of perspectives, ideas and themes of the book. To escape this dilemma, I choose to be selective and try to show how to use some ideas of the book in practice.

One of the key merits in Nelson's approach to the 'rhetoric of politics' is the great number of levels and links between political science and rhetoric. The book does not only proffer the pair of "rhetoric of inquiry" and "rhetorical study of politics" but unfolds to several other directions as well. In his discussion on the 'rhetoric of inquiry', Nelson challenges the strict disciplinary boundaries between political science and the other social sciences, and, in particular, the humanities. In this way, 'rhetoric' also appears in the role of a common disciplinary background of political and social sciences. This tribute to the joint background of humanities and social sciences also implies a conscious deviation from the Aristotelian (and Perelmanian) legacy: "Unfortunately Aristotle tended to sunder poetics from rhetorics, whereas (as Kenneth Burke has suggested) we need to meld them" (p. 137). Nelson's rhetoric includes then – in addition to ethos, pathos and logos – also the *mythos* and aesthetic rhetoric in general.

If constructivists generally recognize a certain *ontological* aspect of rhetoric (in the sense that social and political realities are rhetorically construed), Nelson insists on an *epistemological* role of rhetoric. The forms, figures and tropes of knowing and sharing the knowledge are themselves rhetorical, and sagacious scholars should therefore be more conscious of these aspects of knowing in order to better evaluate their argumentation. Finally, Nelson is not a new dreary accountant-cum-killer of rhetoric who tediously categorizes and analyzes the various sorts of rhetorics in political science without a genuine talent in using and playing with these faculties.

One of the themes Nelson discusses throughout the book is the role of method in political science. He is constantly worried about the way the elegance of method is substituted for richness of politics. The crudest misunderstanding of the book is to assume that Nelson argues for rhetoric as a new method for political science. The

point is not to replace all the old methods but the misguided expectations attached to these methods. "(R)ecent political sciences tend to substitute devices of assumption and method for adequate, persuasive argumentation. Thus they generate peculiar notions of theory, method, models, logic, testing, evidence, objectivity, and other supposed parts of scientific inquiry" (p. 73). The first thing to notice above is Nelson's notion of *several* political sciences, and the rejection of the strife between one or two political sciences. The rhetoric of inquiry helps to argue better with methods, it helps to focus on argumentation instead of pure and clean method.

If "substantive theories" do not inform the choice of research topics, methods and methodism can take their place. Nelson poignantly ridicules current practices by noting how in "political science, research topics come mostly from filling holes in the literature and addressing current issues in politics" (p. 79). In small countries, and 'marginal' political sciences, this "hole-filling" is a generally known and often very successful strategy in establishing international relevance. Within established methodologies, there is almost always a particular "Finnish hole" to be filled, making "X in Finland" a valid start for a practically unending series of mainstream studies.

However, there is no easy way to escape methods: "That methods are the subject of some of the loosest talk in the discipline should not obscure their pivotal role..." (p. 94). How can this pivotal role be properly understood? What political scientists need is "methods tailored specifically to its topics" (p. 95). Nelson's criticism here is directed to an independent 'science of method', methodology. If we now compare Nelson's discussion on method and his program of 'rhetoric of inquiry', we can find a clear parallelity and consequentiality of argument. The rhetoric of inquiry is of no virtual use if it be practiced by people *outside* the political research itself. Rhetorical sensitivities are beneficial only as far as they are included in the practical political research, and when they are not simply used to seize the old places of methodology or the philosophy of science. Nelson's summary of his discussion on method is worth remembering: "When we cannot rely uncritically on data or methods, we must rely – communally and critically – on ourselves" (p. 98).

The centrality of methods is, of course, institutionally secured in various degree requirements. Unfortunately, Nelson passes over this

institutional dilemma of doctoral students who mostly cannot help but continue the search for 'sure' methods.

In the beginning of the book, Nelson outlines an interesting program of research for a 'rhetoric of political inquiry'. Again, he emphasizes the embeddedness of his project in actual research by renaming this approach as the 'politics of political science'. One of his key proposals is to suggest that "the approved and quasi-official rhetorics of political research differ significantly from the informal and usually underground rhetorics of political inquiry" (p. 12). I find the rhetoric of "underground" here more confusing than clarifying, but the contrast between quasi-officially declared rhetorics and what is allowed to oneself in practice (privately or publicly) is certainly worth studying. According to Nelson, "approved" rhetorics is typically employed in methods textbooks, in book chapters and during underground courses, whereas "underground" rhetorics can be found in private conversations, field notes, in prefaces and acknowledgements as well as in research help for Ph.D. students (p. 55).

Nevertheless, these two sides of rhetorics can also be detected from the very same texts. An "approved" version is typically something that is demanded from others, whereas the "underground" version is more or less allowed for oneself. To illustrate this point I discuss a book review written by a Finnish professor of political science, Matti Wiberg. The review was published in the semi-academic journal *Kanava* (8/1998, pp. 511-513). The review clearly belongs to the category of popularized science, which, according to Nelson, has a strong tendency towards "underground" rhetorics. The book reviewed introduces and re-discusses current debates of "life politics" in Finnish. Wiberg's review is thoroughly critical, even outright negative. The title, *"The Rubbish of Today"*, promptly conveys the message. "The book does not report new results of research but is an incoherent, incontinuous and poorly edited collection of articles based on lectures introducing some fashionable thoughts". This contrast between real research and nonsensical discussion is then radicalized: "Why don't sociologists research the Finnish reality instead of introducing other people's abstract thoughts about how to study societies and social changes?" So, there is an unproblematic "Finnish reality" waiting for research instead of futile theorizing. Wiberg further criticizes this category of theorists: "Their own arguments are seldom

supported by systematic evidence" and "the terms of falsfication for their own arguments are not specified, and their thoughts stretch to every direction". Instead of all this rubbish, Wiberg gives his "approved" solution: "Why not study the tested empirical methods of research instead and train oneself to apply them?"

I have no arguments about how apposite Wiberg's criticism may be. It is enough just to note the systematic usage of the approved rhetorics of the 'empirical political science' against the mere discussion on fashionable and useless theories. We can detect "empirical methods", "terms/conditions of falsification", "systematic evidence", "new results of research" and so on. The paradoxical thing in Wiberg's rhetoric, however, is that he himself does not employ the approved methods he suggests to the theorists. The criticized book is not analyzed "empirically", there are no text examples, no attempt at all to show the "terms of falsification" for Wiberg's own theses, no systematic evidence, not a word about the "Finnish reality" constructed in the book. Instead, there are much funnier devices of argument. The review begins with a long quotation from a Finnish historian, who had in 1907 criticized the changing intellectual fashions in Finland. Wiberg frames his story by saying: "These words by Gunnar Suolahti came to my mind when I read the (...) book *Life Politics*".

"Came to my mind"? What should a professional historian of political thought say about picking up colourful past statements with an introduction of "this came to my mind", before using them as *evidence* in current debates? Funny things do not stop here. Wiberg uses a forceful anecdote to clarify his point:

"I well recall how a few years ago Professor Risto Eräsaari, glowing with excitement, introduced new ideas by certain theoreticians during the Annual Conference of Political Science. No one could make head or tail of the lecture. The audience could not conceive of how the concepts introduced would have increased our knowledge about society, nor how they might be applied in concrete social science.

The only question that rose to my mind during the lecture was this: Have you wasted working hours by reading these books? Common decency only stopped me from posing this question. However, afterwards I have regretted this, since there were students present who in their gullibility may have taken the lecture seriously."

Wiberg, who demands strict methodological purism from his opponents, again frames his own argument by a biographical and totally subjective anecdote. The reader should assume the argument by "the only question that rose to my mind" as "systematic evidence"? How could any critic or commentator "falsify" these kinds of private musings? As a matter of fact, what comes to Matti Wiberg's mind in various situations is the final empirical criterion of truth. The general formula, "I don't understand", is a very typical trope of scientific argumentation. The speaker seemingly shows modesty but indicates that because of his/her non-understanding there is nothing worth understanding because 'everybody already knows how knowledgeable and understanding I am'.

However, Nelson's point is not exactly to reveal and ridicule incongruences between these two sorts of rhetorics. He suggests that the "underground" side of rhetorics should be studied and elaborated more thoroughly than the strictly-approved-texts would allow. For instance, the terms and conditions of using personal anecdotes as evidence should be discussed instead of being disguised. We should know, for instance, that in strictly personal anecdotes we cannot reliably claim to know what an "audience" felt and understood. And if the audience above had such unitary thoughts Wiberg claims, we can just wonder why Wiberg still was so worried for "gullible students". Anecdotes can teach a lot but not when used in unreflected ways.

Nelson outlines two basic ways that political science can surrender its relevance. In its search for clarity and method, it seems to have an inbuilt tendency to reduce action to behaviour, to cut the argument out. On the opposite side, the assignments of public debates are too easily assumed to be objectives of research. If "growth of government" is publicly discussed, there are number of political scientists who are instantly eager to study this pointed phenomenon. Proper political relevance is not, however, achieved by adopting rhetorically ready-made 'problems' and 'issues' from public debates. The debates cannot be reduced nor accepted as topic-givers, they must be studied themselves.

In his discussion and re-writing of classical rhetoric, Nelson offers a number of fresh perspectives. He wants to re-arrange, in a number of ways, the Aristotelian evaluation of rhetoric, poetics, and dialecti-

cal logic. "Precisely because of their analytical rigour, logic and dialectic are elliptical, whereas rhetorics and poetics are capable of completion precisely because of their practicality" (p. 137). A rhetorical analysis, says Nelson, "is a practical reality in its own right". This turning of tables is persuasive, still I am dubious whether even a rhetorical analysis could escape radical selectivity. Be that as it may, Nelson's argumentation against the Aristotelian dogma is admirable.

The major move, though, is to suggest *'mythos'* as the fourth basic 'mode' of argumentation besides ethos, logos, and pathos. The study of mythos is currently needed "in order to appreciate mass persuasion" (p. 137). Nelson suggests that a mythical analysis would include the same operations as Aristotle's study of *topoi*. The current usage of topics as synonym for issues is badly misleading because the Aristotelian topoi referred to permanent *tropes* of argument. For instance, "dividing activists into moderates and extremists is a commonplace of liberals" (p. 144). Besides topics, tropes, stories, and styles are relevant in the analysis of myths. The late-modern arrogance of eradicating past myths looks fairly naive after Nelson's discussion. The myths he discusses are not quite marginal. In contrast, he suggests the necessity to understand "how media aren't media, how representatives don't and can't represent, and how government doesn't govern" (p. 168).

One of his proposals is to articulate myths by studying rituals. His example, the US Senate debates on the Gulf War, gives insights on the rituality of the debates as well as the myths sustained. I have suggested a study on the Finnish academic rituals of dissertation. Even if dissertations are de facto accepted in the faculty meeting after the statements by two referees, a public, formal and festive debate is arranged. At the end of the public defence of the thesis, an opportunity to intervene is allowed to the audience but only with the clear implication that no-one should actually step forward. To my reading, the contradictory myths of "science is public", "science is tested knowledge" and "science is a sign of social rise" are supported by these rituals.

They are other elements in Nelson's book – say the "imaginative etymologies" – which did not thoroughly impress me. An admirer of Nelson's film analysis must still wait for his *Cowboy Politics*. However, his insistence on imagination and poetic play with the domi-

nant political imagery seems to me to be both a refreshing and relevant way to invent new political thinking. "Modern ideologies – liberalism, socialism, and even some species of conservatism – all imagine a state or government as a human machine for powering and regulating the (other) humans... What if the government was never a machine or a man?" (pp. 155-156). This certainly is a book of questions, and can therefore be recommended everywhere where questions and challenges are honoured in curriculum.