Editorial: Rhetoric of Praise

By Alice G. den Otter

Words of praise abound in The Semiotic Review of Books: “Excellent text,” “seamlessly produced,” “enriches and extends viewpoints,” “engaging, nuanced, and sophisticated,” “laudable enterprise.” These words are not particularly unusual; other periodicals use similar ones to express approval and commendation in their reviews of books, movies, and even sports events. Publishers and distributors employ praise words avidly in their promotional materials. Indeed, the advertising world in general relies heavily upon praise (“Best fund management group.” “Delightful inns and fine cuisine.” “Academic excellence in a spectacular environment”), frequently using the medium of testimony or third person narration to avoid the obvious bias of self-aggrandizement. Praise casts texts and performances in an elevated, positive light, persuading us that they exist in the realm of the Good and implying that we ought to appreciate, emulate, or at least buy access to those that receive the greatest and most consistent accolades.

Nevertheless, the words of praise with which I began cannot stand alone, nor do they in their original contexts. As French moralist Jean de la Bruyere (1963; orig. 1688) once noted, “a heap of epithets is poor praise: the praise lies in the facts, and in the way of telling them.” This is why reviews greatly exceed promotional materials in persuading us that certain works are worthy of being praised. Whereas the publisher’s commentary on the back cover of a case study might say “provocative and enlightening,” the reviewer’s similar words are accompanied by detailed discussion of the reasons, warrants, and evidence that support such a claim. Even potential drawbacks are considered and refuted. Praise, after all, is a judgement and partakes in the rhetorical quest to persuade others to make the same judgement.

Aristotle in his Rhetoric (ca. 330 BC; 1909) places praise in the same category as its opposite blame since both are concerned with conditions of goodness in the present. Praise is the positive term, blame being spurred by the inability to praise due to a lack of evidence. We blame people who are not generous, considerate, or honest. We blame books that lack thorough research, insight, or relevance. But the qualities of reference remain those of praise, making praise the operative concept.

Aristotle calls the rhetoric of praise epideictic (ceremonial) rhetoric, and notes that it is one of the three basic types of persuasion (13-14). The other types are forensic (detective) rhetoric, which is used to persuade judges of guilt or innocence in the past, and deliberative (political) rhetoric, used to persuade decision-makers of advantage or harm in the future. We can see how closely the three are interwoven when we consider the
following (unsubstantiated) claims. Epideictic: “Huckleberry Finn is a racially sensitive and perceptive novel.” Forensic: “Huckleberry Finn proves Samuel Clemens was not racist.” Deliberative: “Huckleberry Finn should be taught in the classroom.” Even though praise of present virtue, as depicted in the epideictic claim, might be used to support the defense of past innocence (forensic claim) or to recommend future promotion (deliberative claim), the three are clearly distinct in their emphases. When the focus is on the present, without an eye to litigation or utility, the epideictic thrust is predominant. Such is the case, I would suggest, with reviews of the ever present world of art, entertainment, and books. They may end with brief recommendations for the future, but the rhetoric of praise is by far the strongest force.

Praise persuades best through amplification (Aristotle 41), listing exemplary actions and then elaborating upon them with interpretations that show how even the smallest actions contribute to the overall grand and noble effect. For example, one might praise William Blake for his radical visionary imagination, mentioning all of his poems and paintings, and elaborating on particular epiphanies such as the moment in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell when a raging abyss imaginatively transforms into a moonlit river accompanied by harp music. The more details, the higher is the praise. In contrast, forensic rhetoric persuades through syllogistic reasoning, efficiently demonstrating proofs of initial premises with statistics, physical evidence, and selected data; and deliberative rhetoric persuades through logical illustration of potential outcomes based upon past or synthetic examples (Aristotle 41-42). Both forensic and deliberative rhetoric involve linear logic, which the amplification of epideictic rhetoric often transcends.

Although Aristotle considers all three rhetorical types equally important, the rhetoric of praise has historically been undervalued, perhaps because of its role in public ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, where embellishment and inflation are natural components. During the second century AD, a period known to rhetoricians as “the Second Sophistic,” epideictic was associated mainly with display and ornamental compositions, becoming the dominant form of public discourse when political speech and legal justice were suppressed through the tyranny of Roman emperors (Vickers 1988: 54-57). During the Renaissance, stylistic concerns continued to dominate, amplifying simple statements with witty flourishes to make praise or blame all the more memorable. Shakespeare, in one of his most famous sonnets, both exemplifies that tradition and mocks it when he praises a woman who lacks conventional artificiality:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare. (Sonnet 130)
By the nineteenth century, epideictic rhetoric became fully associated with belles lettres, beautiful poetic writing that somehow lacked significance in the practical world (White 1997:22-23). Praise was useful for love and religion, but seemingly not for science and economy which required plain statements about the way things are.

In recent years rhetoricians have reclaimed the field of epideictic rhetoric, arguing that the view of praise as an expressive display without social consequence is inadequate and limiting. As Cynthia Sheard (1996:787-88) explains, “a dogmatic rhetoric of display serving primarily to allow speaker and audience to feel good about themselves” is static and reductive. Sheard perceives instead that praise is a necessary spur to the world of action and culture. The more a virtue is praised, the more it is confirmed and promoted within a particular community. Even if listeners do not imitate the exact virtues of a hero, they nevertheless internalize an awareness that these heroic attributes are praiseworthy, thus ensuring that values of the status quo are respected and maintained. Sheard (1996:790) concludes that “epideictic identifies and brings together the interests of individuals and communities,” not only to confirm the present but also to assist in envisioning the future.

Even Aristotle recognizes that the rhetoric of praise has an important social function: it rewards (and thus encourages) virtue, which Aristotle defines as “a faculty of providing and preserving ‘goods’; and a faculty of doing many and great benefits to all men in all cases” (36-37). Whatever or whoever does the greatest good to the greatest number of people is the most praiseworthy. Virtue, here, is distinctly active and socially enhancing. Simply being wealthy or beautiful is not enough unless these advantages enable active virtues such as generosity and kindness. Praise, says Aristotle, “is language which brings out the greatness of a virtue” (40), identifying the actions that display this greatness, and implying that the audience should imitate such actions.

Indeed, praise almost has a deliberative, future-oriented function, albeit the imperative “should” normally connected to deliberation remains implicit rather than explicit. This is what is most appealing about epideictic rhetoric: it does not preach overtly. Although the hidden message is that the good should continue, be repeated, purchased, or befriended, praise does not tell us what to do. It simply sets up the model, replete with justification based on cherished social values, and invites us to look and see for ourselves. Psycho-social forces of desire and competition, including peer pressure, do the rest. Praise thus contributes to the maintenance of virtue while allowing us to feel free to choose.

What is interesting, though, is that specific virtues and values change with time and culture. Rhetoricians have always recognized that. Even though Aristotle lists “Justice, Courage, Temperance, Magnificence, Magnanimity, Liberality, Gentleness, Prudence, Wisdom” as comprising the essence of Virtue, he notes that one must praise what is considered praiseworthy to each particular audience (39). When with the Athenians, praise the Wisdom of art; when with the Spartans, praise the Courage of war. While this relativity is sometimes mocked as being too performative, lacking fixed principles, one need only think of the difference between the interests of a young boy and a mature woman to see how necessary it can be to alter the values one praises when addressing different audiences. To praise Bart Simpson from “The Simpsons” television sitcom, for example, would require different emphases: Bart’s cool wit and risk-taking courage would be considered more praiseworthy by the boy than by the woman, who might nevertheless be induced to appreciate Bart’s imagination and sincerity. This is not to say that both sets of virtues aren’t present, but they are valued differently. Similarly, no
academic speaking to academics would praise an author’s liberality in sending a manuscript to a vanity publisher or an author’s magnificent display of obscure vocabulary, since liberality and magnificence are not the primary virtues to which an academic aspires.

Nicole E. Didicher (2000:76) notes that the word “praise” is cognate with “price” — “what we praise is what we put a high price on, what we value, what is of use to us.” To a certain extent, this suggests that praise is as fickle as the stock market, something that disturbs idealistic notions of praise as a mark of excellence. Nevertheless, as Barbara Hernstein Smith (1983:11) insists, “all value is radically contingent, being neither an inherent property of objects nor an arbitrary projection of subjects but, rather, the product of the dynamics of an economic system.” We praise not only what has personal and intrinsic value, but more importantly, what has value in our society, among our colleagues, our families, and our friends. We consciously link to their values when we persuade them to appreciate what we hold dear, like setting a price based upon neighbouring commodities. As with market goods, we recognize that there is a hierarchy of values that fluctuates according to economic forces. And so, as Aristotle says, we grant the greatest praise to someone (or something) who is “the only one, or the first, or one of a few who has done something, or [one who] has done it in the highest degree” (41), leading to a premium upon novelty and greatness.

Book reviews clearly participate in such an economy, although the praise accorded a book does not necessarily match the price. Some books are worth buying and others are not, which may be why reviews have become so important to consumers. In the world of academia, of course, value exceeds monetary expenditure. Intellectuals are, in fact, interested in what Pierre Bourdieu (1991: 66) calls “symbolic capital,” the worth one accrues through education, class, and accomplishment. Some books increase our assets, giving our own arguments authority and credibility when we quote them; others do not. Praise clarifies which ones contain the greatest merit, not only identifying the details but also reminding us of the virtues that are the most worthy to be emulated. Thus it is that Originality, Perception, Logic, Clarity, and Relevance are ennobled in today’s information age, with even irrational fiction being blessed under the auspices of Originality and Emotional Realism.

Still, how does one praise in such a way that one isn’t just hawking wares and increasing one’s own symbolic capital? Religious thinkers have long pondered this question, convinced, as Karmen MacKendrick (2000: 20) reminds us, that praise “is an act of responsive delight, an act performed for love of love, justified where simple information is not.” I think we need to retain some of that delight when we praise, no matter how audience-specific and objective we attempt to be in our evaluations. Delight, after all, is where scholarship begins, sparking the curiosity and the satisfaction that spur discovery. And it is through delight that we engage and teach our students. As poet William Wordsworth observed in 1800, “We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The Man of science, the Chemist and Mathematician [. . ] know and feel this” (1965: 455). Delight speaks to the human spirit in a way that reason does not. This is why Aristotle insists that any act of persuasion needs to appeal not only to logic (logos) but also to emotion (pathos) and credibility (ethos) (6-7). To praise effectively, we need to address the whole spectrum. Not only do we need to say, “This is good because it has the following examples of goodness.” We also need to add, “This is
This last point, about trust, concerns credibility. To be credible in praise, one needs to pay attention to the praise object (or person) without questions of guilt or utility. Praise is not praise when tossed about lightly, or when proffered as part of an exchange for favours: that is merely flattery. In religious circles, the full attention that praise requires verges on prayer (McKendrick 2000: 27). But in academic circles, such attention is more frequently considered respect or dedication. Roland Barthes notes in his book *Criticism and Truth* (1987: 92), that the very attention a critic devotes to a work is already affirmative, considering it as a serious work to be debated by scholars, no matter how many weaknesses are identified or denounced. In Barthes’ words, “the critic . . . is obliged to adopt a certain ‘tone,’ and this tone, when all’s said and done, can only be affirmative.”

What the tone ultimately affirms is the work’s status as a worthy text, a writing that speaks to and into the reader’s world. This is not to say that the text has no flaws, but that it has passed the “taste test” since it has attracted and sustained the interest of the reviewer. As Martin Amis (2001: xiv) confesses, reviewers learn to “avoid the stuff [they] are unlikely to warm to.” Simply being reviewed, therefore, is a sign of praise.

Still, as Amis (2001: xv) points out, if delight and attention are the main criteria for praise, then “there is no means for distinguishing the excellent from the less excellent.” Anything can be praised if one focuses long enough upon it. Poets have been known to praise sand and thorns as eloquently as they praise roses. True, but the rhetoric of praise is not just an expression of personal enthrallment. Delight and attention are the beginning. But persuasion is the end. And for that to be accomplished, praise necessarily must convince another. To do so, praise requires proof: not testimony, but evidence which the audience can assess for themselves. Here is where the amplification of details mentioned earlier plays a significant role.

For the book reviewer, the proof of praise consists in quotation. As Amis (2001: xv) writes, “Quotation is the reviewer’s only hard evidence. Or semi-hard evidence. Without it, in any case, criticism is a shop-queue monologue.” According to Amis, the most convincing evidence consists in quotations that veer away from cliché, avoiding the overused words that have been voiced by so many others that they lack personality and credibility. Consequently, Amis writes, “When I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés. When I praise, I am usually quoting the opposed qualities of freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice” (2001: xv). Here, then, is a distinction that can be useful in discerning the quality of praise. The greater the originality of the quotations, the greater the elevation. Naturally a certain amount of perceived originality depends upon the audience’s previous experience. Nevertheless, the flavour of the quotations certainly determines the flavour of the praise. The more striking the quotations, the more striking the praise.

Sometimes, of course, the quotations do not appear striking until the praiser interprets them in a striking manner. This is a more complex level of praise that depends firmly upon interpretation. Simply designating a text as wonderful, followed by a list of quotations is not enough. To praise fully, one needs to draw out signifiers of greatness, no matter how subtle these might appear. Aristotle suggests that an action which might be disadvantageous when considering its future worth, for instance incurring death by rescuing one’s friend, might yet be praised as being selfless or noble. Or an action that might be considered a fault when examined forensically, such as stealing an important document, might yet be praised for its contribution toward a higher end (Aristotle 14). This ability to
shift the perception of something not-good to something good, has occasionally aroused suspicion about the slipperiness of rhetoric. But sometimes one needs to be creative in turning what might at first not appear remarkable into something astonishing and apt. In this way, praise really is a semiotic art.

For example, Michel Serres’ book *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, begins its first chapter with a startling instance of praise. Born left-handed, Serres was forced by his teachers, by one anonymous and nasty teacher in particular, to write with his right hand, although his left hand continued to be dominant with forks and scissors. While this experience caused years of frustration and anger at the right-handed majority, Serres now declares his “heartfelt gratitude” to the schoolmaster. He praises the teacher, the tyrant, for forcing him to experience a wholeness that few of us have experienced: the completeness of being able to use both right and left sides of his body with equal grace and strength rather than leaving, as is customary, one side limply dragging while the other acts. “Do Schoolmasters realize,” he asks, “that the only ones they ever teach are the ones they have thwarted or forced to cross?” (1997:3).

Sometimes the most intriguing types of praise are those that take a little act and embellish it so that it appears a grand gesture. Our own mundane experiences become elevated in the process, making us appreciate afresh those things we take for granted. William Wordsworth in his poem of 1789 “Tintern Abbey” thus praises the “little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love” which play no part in one’s egoistic self image and yet constitute the “best portion of a good man’s life” because they are rendered without thought of recompense or profit (1965: 108:4-6). Similarly, Barthes (1977: 135) praises an obscure passage in Goethe’s *Werther* “where suddenly appear a dish of green peas cooked in butter and a peeled orange separated into sections.” These seemingly trivial details take on semiotic grandeur when Barthes praises not only their “sumptuous appearance of a materiality” but also their welcome “distortion, a sudden gap wedged into the intellectual murmur.” The creativity and freshness of such praise are delightful enough to win our assent.

On a final note, I want to suggest that what differentiates a semiotic review from other reviews is precisely the rhetoric of praise. Unlike the forensic and deliberative thrusts of shorter appraisals, a semiotic review attends seriously and creatively to the praiseworthy significance of a text (or its disappointing lack), exploring not only the possibilities of its content, but also the virtues of the interpretive repertoire, the questions, the associations, the system of expectations constructed around that content. The heightened attention to signifying details marks appreciation and inspires delight. And through this rhetoric of praise the values of an interdisciplinary academic community are imagined, confirmed, and promoted.

Alice G. den Otter is Associate Professor of English at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Canada. She is the editor of *Relocating Praise: Literary Modalities and Rhetorical Contexts* (2000).

**References**


Wordsworth, William (1965) “Tinturn Abbey” (1798)