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Lois Peter Agnew’s well-researched and comprehensive study, Thomas De Quincey: British Rhetoric’s Romantic Turn, is one in a series produced by SUNY on Rhetoric in the Modern Era, edited by Arthur E. Walzer and Edward Schiapp. The series is intended for “nonspecialists—graduate students coming to the study of a theorist for the first time and professors broadly interested in the rhetorical tradition” (Foreword).

While noting that most histories of British rhetoric end with Richard Whately’s 1828 Elements of Rhetoric, often considered the final word on the subject, Agnew claims in her introduction that, because their ideas are non-traditional, the works of lesser known nineteenth century British theorists are equally important to rhetorical history. They point out the expanding parameters used to define rhetoric and bring it into the modern era when technology and culture were changed by the industrial revolution. Although Thomas De Quincey is best known for his autobiographical work concerning the use of opium, his oeuvre also includes many essays on rhetoric, language, and style. It is through these works, Agnew argues, that De Quincey has become particularly important among the often overlooked nineteenth century theorists. His “radically distinct” perspective on language and public life, although grounded in Aristotle, reflects the cultural circumstances of the nineteenth century and “fills in the gaps” left by most accounts of rhetorical history (1).

In chapter two, “De Quincey’s Life,” Agnew describes the sociocultural and educational experiences that shaped not only De Quincey’s life but also his “complex interpretation” of those experiences resulting in his somewhat unconventional theory of rhetoric (18). Key elements in De Quincey’s life include the death of his father and of his two sisters early in his life, a complicated relationship with his mother, and an unstable educational path, which he chose to abandon before his final exams at Oxford. In addition, financial difficulties that began with the death of his father grew exponentially throughout his life and were never completely resolved until his daughters took command of his finances. Significant influences in De Quincey’s life include Romantic writers Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Pope, with whom he did not always agree, but who helped shape the Romantic impulse that eventually manifested in his theories of language and in his writing. Another strong influence, Agnew points out, was opium, which De Quincy used with little restraint at various times throughout his life. The events of and influences on De Quincey’s life,
coupled with his “eccentricity and sociability, genius and ineptitude, obsession with organization and affinity for chaos” were integral parts of his formation of a “dialogic rhetorical theory that is simultaneously grounded in tradition and radically subversive” (41). De Quincey came to believe that every subject, whether in writing or in life, is diverse and multidimensional with a latent number of valid “alternate possibilities” which he consistently explored, largely through his own writing (18–44).

In chapter three, “Eddying Thoughts and Dialogical Potential,” Agnew summarizes the five essays through which De Quincey develops the major principles of his rhetoric. These essays, each discussing one of De Quincey’s key themes are “Rhetoric,” “Style,” “Language,” “Conversation,” and “A Brief Appraisal of Greek Literature in Its Foremost Pretensions,” were published in a “periodical dedicated to intellectual matters” (47). While De Quincey despised the periodical format and considered himself a “hack in an endless struggle with deadlines” (Devlin, qtd. in Agnew 46), the magazine work, with its unyielding deadlines and timely paychecks, ultimately formed De Quincey as a writer.

Agnew claims that much of De Quincey’s own writing about rhetoric seems abstract, but she works through that obscurity to clearly explain and define the unique perspectives involved in his particular rhetoric as she delves into De Quincey’s criticisms of John Donne, Francis Bacon, and Sir Walter Raleigh, among others. Agnew describes and clarifies De Quincey’s distinct line between rhetoric and eloquence, claiming that rhetoric has much more to do with the written text than with oratory, yet still establishing a clear connection between rhetoric and conversation. De Quincy blurs a very traditional boundary but still manages to revitalize a rhetoric seemingly lost in the nineteenth century’s language of business and industry.

In chapter four, “De Quincey’s ‘Science of Style,’” Agnew continues her discussion of De Quincey’s essays, calling attention to his perception that the intellectual energy of the Romantic era was fizzling out with the onset of mass marketed publications. “For De Quincey,” she explains, “the art of style facilitates the connections and modifications that are integral to the development of complex ideas” (83). As with rhetoric, De Quincey saw the nineteenth century as lacking in effective writing and clear thinking which was due, ironically, to the inferior quality of printed material available, such as the magazine through which he published his own work. Particularly interesting in this chapter, in this age of equality and feminism, is Agnew’s discussion concerning De Quincey’s opinion of French style, as well as his opinion of “well educated women not professionally given to literature,” who “might offer hope for the British language” through their communication style (100). Here Agnew calls attention to De Quincey’s complicated relationship with women as well as his
gender specific conclusions that, while not quite contemporary, acknowledges repression of women in industrial society (101).

Having devoted a large part of the book thus far to De Quincey’s rather unconventional theories of rhetoric, in chapter five, “De Quincey’s Writing: Dialogic Rhetoric in Action,” Agnew goes on to demonstrate, through careful readings of selected passages, how the major principles of his non-traditional rhetoric apply to De Quincey’s own work. Disagreeing with Frederick W. Haberman, who claims that De Quincey’s rhetorical theory is egocentric, Agnew argues that while De Quincey did not “intend to reserve his theory for himself” (104), it is still challenging to find the precise principles that do guide his writing, which she sees as an “intricately woven pattern that juxtaposes personal reflection, cultural and historical background, encounters with other people, and investigation of varying approaches to a subject…” (105). Difficult though it may be, Agnew does an excellent job of indicating where and how De Quincey’s work adheres to the principles of rhetoric he has set forth in his essays. The passages she has chosen are lively and engaging, and show the full range of De Quincey’s interests while illuminating his particular rhetoric, style, and language.

Chapter six, “De Quincey’s Place in Rhetorical Histories,” places De Quincey into nineteenth century Britain, an era in which traditional western rhetoric had begun to lose its purpose in an industrialized society. De Quincey’s theories, which were radically multidimensional, infinitely subjective, and rife with “alternatives” and “possibilities,” disrupted established assumptions surrounding traditional western rhetoric, and, according to Agnew, De Quincey was not only the creator of the change that was about to occur, but he ushered it in. He was the bridge upon which later theorists and writers would cross from the early nineteenth century to the latter part. De Quincey’s “possibilities,” “dimensions,” and “alternatives” would be their destination.

Opinions vary on the actual value of De Quincey’s work and on his place in the history of rhetoric. Later in chapter six, after considering the matter thoroughly, Agnew claims that De Quincey deserves attention if only because his “theory is startling in its rejection of the civic mission that many of his contemporaries had assumed to be rhetoric’s primary domain” (PG). Rhetoric, like so many other aspects of a civilized lifestyle, has survived only because its theories are adaptable to cultural change.

In this volume, Agnew presents an extensive discussion of Thomas De Quincey, a little known British literary figure, whose ideas and theories of rhetoric, conversation, and style are overlooked in the history of rhetoric. She guides the reader through the cultural changes inherent to the nineteenth century and places De Quincey into a proper place within that history. After perusing this book, a reader understands the philosophical development of this
British intellectual and why he should be considered important to students of rhetoric, the Romantic era, and the Enlightenment era. Although condensed into a mere 165 pages, Agnew’s extensive research is of value to students of rhetoric, particularly those encountering De Quincey for the first time.

The goal of the SUNY series, Rhetoric in the Modern Era, is “to prompt and sponsor book-length treatments of important rhetorical theorists and of philosophers and literary theorists who make substantial contributions to our understanding of language and rhetoric” (Foreword). Agnew’s highly accessible book certainly meets and even exceeds that goal, and the quality of this book definitely invites readers to seek out companion volumes in the SUNY series.

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