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William D. Harpine
University of South Carolina - Aiken, williamh@usca.edu

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Genung's Theory of Persuasion:

A Literary Theory of Oratory of Late Nineteenth-Century America

William D. Harpine

School of Communication

The University of Akron

Akron OH 44325-1003

harpine@uakron.edu

330-972-6219

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Genung's Theory of Persuasion:

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Abstract

John Genung's late nineteenth century rhetoric textbooks, although founded on an eighteenth century model of Scottish composition, present an original conception of oratory. Genung's theory breaks free of the classical models and lays out the path to be followed during the development of speech studies among American rhetoricians of the early twentieth century.

Genung's Theory of Persuasion:
A Literary Theory of Oratory of Late Nineteenth-Century America

John F. Genung's (1887) *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric with Illustrative Example*s, a North American rhetoric manual of the late nineteenth century, represents the literary approach to rhetorical studies that was typical of that era. Influenced by the Belles Lettres tradition in rhetoric, Genung's book is more reminiscent of the Ramistic heritage of rhetorical studies than of the Ciceronian, if one may make such a distinction, for Genung often treats oratory as a species of literature that in some ways is subordinate to writing. Although cloaked in faculty psychology, his ideas unmistakably foreshadow approaches to public speaking that are, a century later, routinely taught in most college public speaking courses.

In this and a revised work, *The Working Principles of Rhetoric*, Genung (1900) presents in germinal form more of the concepts of rhetoric that dominated twentieth century approaches to public speaking. At the same time, Genung's work represents a tradition against which rhetorical scholars interested in oratory would soon rebel. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Genung's approach to rhetoric, an influence that developed, in part, as direct impact on rhetorical thought, and in part, as the stimulus for reaction.

Too often, one takes the academic approaches of the present day for granted. Genung's work contributed to a North American approach to academic rhetoric. His *Practical Elements* dominated composition education near the end of the nineteenth century (Berlin 1984, 75; Connors 1997, 132). Genung's work was cited even after it passed out of print, to the point that Thonssen included some brief selections from Genung in a 1942 anthology of readings about rhetoric (Thonssen 1942, 311-314). Like many things American, Genung's work blazes a new path, one that would *eventually but indirectly* lead to the distinctly American tradition of rhetorical studies, founded in but advancing beyond the ancient theories, that would emerge a few decades later.

Genung (1887) defines rhetoric as "the art of adapting discourse, in harmony with its subject and occasion, to the requirements of a reader or hearer" (1). Genung's (1887) book mostly treats rhetoric as a matter of organization (248-300) and language style (13-214)—as *dispositio* and *elocutio,* although he employs no such terms. He covers invention under several chapter titles; for example, "Invention dealing with Observed Objects" (Genung 1887, 326-354). Much of what he calls invention, however, a later rhetorician might treat as disposition; for example, Genung (1887) treats narration under invention (355-383). These attitudes of Genung's make the brief discussions of oratory, argumentation, and persuasion that he tucks in the back of his textbooks even more intriguing. It is upon these latter sections that this essay concentrates.

Anyone who scans an American composition textbook of, say, the 1960's, will easily see many ways, large and small, in which it reflects ideas such as Genung's. Berlin characterizes Genung's aim as to rework rhetorical education, particularly composition education, to free it from the classical models. Nonetheless, Berlin argues that Genung did not free himself from the influence of Blair, Campbell, and Whately. Instead, Genung found himself mired in an eighteenth century model of composition. Berlin (1981) also notes Genung's reliance on an outdated faculty psychology (74-75, 82-83). Berlin (1984) argues that writing instruction in the United States in general rebelled against English models of education (6-7). This may account for the turn toward the Scottish rhetoricians, Blair and Campbell (Berlin 1984, 62-63). Berlin (1984) feels that writing instructors of the late nineteenth century abandoned the classical model "partly because it was grounded in a noetic field that was being repudiated everywhere, but nowhere with such fervor as in America" (6). Although John Quincy Adams' work, grounded in the Aristotelian tradition, had been published, it had little influence in the face of this massive rejection of the old models (Berlin 1984, 15). Adams stressed that "The peculiar and highest characteristic, which distinguishes man from the rest of the animal kingdom, is REASON" (Adams 1801, 1:13-14). Berlin may be right that rhetorical theorists of the late nineteenth century were deliberately rebelling against such rationalistic theories (Berlin 1984, 13-17).

Summarizing Genung's approach to rhetoric, Cohen (1994) notes Genung's definition of rhetoric as encompassing the spoken and written word, Genung's acceptance of the definition between conviction and persuasion, and his reliance on a faculty psychology (18-20). Whately (1846) developed an influential theory of rhetoric founded on faculty psychology. Whately divides his book into sections on the appeals to the understanding and the appeals to the will, as well as style and delivery. Genung's textbooks appear to follow this pattern, although Genung (1887) greatly amplifies the discussion of style, while slighting delivery.

The Ciceronian tradition in rhetoric encompasses the five canons of invention, arrangement, elocution, delivery, and memory. One does, of course, find evidence of these canons in the work of various ancient writers, including the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* (Kennedy 1972, 110-112), and these authors may have drawn on a further tradition, perhaps an oral one (Kennedy 1972, 126-138).

One might look to Peter Ramus, however, in order to take in the viewpoint of Genung's work. The idea behind Ramus' reforms of education was to divide learning into various distinct areas of study, each area to fall under a specialty. Ramus (1986) complained against Quintilian, for example, that "Quintilian follows Aristotle's and Cicero's confusion of dialectic and rhetoric" (80). Ramus (1986) continues that Quintilian threw into his study of rhetoric almost every other subject as well (80). This moved Ramus to limit rhetoric to delivery and stylistic ornament (Ramus 1986, 86; Ramus 1969, 55). In Lanham's

(1993) interesting perception, Ramus made rhetoric into one of the "cosmetic arts," independent of philosophical ideas (157).

In no way did Ramus anticipate that a student would be exposed to one subject only, to the exclusion of others. Unfortunately, perhaps, but predictably, students quickly began to specialize just like their professors (Howell 1956, 146-155). Over the centuries, scholars of language sometimes taught their field as if it were rhetoric entire, excluding from their examination such matters as argument, or how to present an oral argument to a live audience.

Blair often seems to fall into this tradition, but it is entirely unclear that Blair himself was ever as limited in his view of rhetoric as were his followers. He certainly understands that style is only a part of persuasion:

> For, according as society improves and flourishes, men acquire more influence over one another by means of reasoning and discourse; and in proportion as that influence is felt to enlarge, it must follow, as a natural consequence, that they will bestow more care upon the methods of expression their conceptions with propriety and eloquence. (Blair 1861, 9-10)

Blair recognizes that style could never be all of rhetoric; it is simply the area of rhetoric that interests him. Unfortunately, it became all too easy for rhetoric manuals of the late 1800's, following in Blair's tradition, to slight audience analysis, speech content, and delivery, all of which are likewise essential to effective spoken rhetoric.

Genung did not follow Ramus' system, but was Ramistic in the sense that he did not reassemble and integrate the canons. He still envisioned rhetoric as in large part the study of style. His faculty psychology led him to treat one canon of rhetoric as an appeal to one faculty, and a different canon as an appeal to some other faculty. He did, however, look toward the twentieth century by moving toward a more comprehensive study of rhetoric that included invention and arrangement. The discussion of oral persuasion seemed like an afterthought, being confined to a small section near the back of his books, but nonetheless represented a positive step toward the resurgence of oratorical studies of the early twentieth century. In his discussion of persuasion, Genung attempted to revert to a more comprehensive view of oratory. He carefully examined the manner in which an orator would interact with and persuade an audience, but did so in a way that reflected little awareness of the learning embodied in rhetoric manuals in the Ciceronian tradition.

Unlike a rhetorical theorist of a hundred years later (or, perhaps, earlier), Genung takes the position that persuasion is concerned with "truths, but truths of a particular kind." Where argumentation tests the truth of a writer's claims, persuasion investigates truths that are "practical" or "personal." "In a word," writes Genung, "the whole sphere of duty, interest, privilege, happiness, conduct, is open to the work of persuasion" (Genung 1887, 447). This perspective immediately prevents Genung from addressing persuasion as involving a combination of several arts comparable to the canons of rhetoric. Guided by

faculty psychology, Genung has trouble coming to terms with the possibility that expository writing could be persuasive, for example, or that persuasive oratory could be informative. This is clearest when he comments that "Persuasion is so predominantly the work of oral communication, it so almost necessarily requires the close contact of personal presence. [. . .] Persuasion presupposes a speaker at close quarters with his audience" (Genung 1887, 449).

Genung's examination of persuasion thus takes the perspective of the speaker rather than the writer. Persuasion tries "to make the hearer see and feel that his interest and duty lie in the adoption of a certain prescribed line of conduct or belief" (Genung 1887, 456). He stresses as the first principle of persuasion the "alliance" between the speaker and audience. The speaker seeks to "enlist their sympathies and energies in a common cause with him" (Genung 1887, 449). Genung briefly examines credibility, suggesting that a speaker must establish the trust and respect of the audience, doing so "with a manly, self-respecting frankness." The speaker should "approach his audience as men occupying a common ground with himself, as having rights, abilities, opinions, that are to be respected and conciliated" (Genung 1887, 449).

As a further principle, Genung (1887) stresses the importance of the absence of "the appearance of any kind of artifice" and of adapting to the audience (450). This requires, in Genung's (1887) view, "an intuitive knowledge of men." This intuitive knowledge, Genung implies, is to be found by studying the audience members' physiques (Genung 1887, 452). He quotes favorably from

Henry Ward Beecher's explanation of the importance of being aware of the size of an audience member's brow, the shape of his head, the texture of the hair, and the height of the forehead. Indeed, advancing beyond mere phrenology, the lengthy quotation from Beecher also explains the importance of analyzing an audience member's stomach, which organ reflects the person's "natural forces." All of these, one is led to believe, reflect the construction of a person's brain and therefore offer the speaker information about the person's temperament (Genung 1887, 452-453).

Then again, Genung recognizes that the aim of persuasion is "the achievement of an object" rather than to expound eloquently on a topic. Thus, developing his faculty psychology, Genung (1887) divides persuasion into the "address to the intellect" (456-459), the "address to the feelings" 459-463), and the "address to the will" (463-468). He judges the address to the intellect to be indispensable to effective persuasion. However, this, "so far is it is *merely* thought," cannot lead the audience to action (Genung 1887, 457). Genung (1887) urges that argumentation is more important in the address to the intellect than is narrative (458). He advises speakers to make the address to the intellect with "simplicity," "plainness," and "directness" (458).

Moving to the feelings, Genung (1887) suggests that appeals to the emotions are necessary to move human beings from their natural state of lethargy. He compares the orator's appeal to the emotions to "overcoming inertia" (Genung 1887, 459). Genung quotes Marc Antony's funeral oration for

Julius Caesar, from Shakespeare's play, as an admirable example of an orator's appeal to the emotions. Genung's treatment does not show clear awareness that Shakespeare's account of this speech is fictionalized: "The value of this knowledge of human nature, and of the considerations that will be most potent with the hearers, is strikingly illustrated in the speeches of Brutus and Antony, in Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar" (Genung 1887, 454). Thus, despite his attempt to differentiate between oratory and other literature, Genung's predispositions seem to forbid him from making the distinction in a clear, consistent manner. Speakers make the address to the feelings with "language, voice, and action" (Genung 1887, 559). This contrasts with the plain style used for the address to the intellect. It also implies, consistent with the faculty psychology, that the appeals are distinct; Genung does not seem to conceive of making a simultaneous appeal to the intellect and appeal to the feelings. His methods for these appeals differ enough to be incompatible.

Genung's discussion of the feelings remains vague. Unlike the typical writer of earlier rhetoric manuals, Genung makes no attempt to catalogue different emotions, and he does not advise the persuader which emotions are to be used under what circumstances. He does stress that a skilled speaker—and here Genung has the speaker rather than the writer in mind—must stimulate the emotions without showing too much emotion in giving the speech. He therefore warns against extravagant use of language (Genung 1887, 461-462).

Last in Genung's list of faculties is the will. The appeal to the will, Genung (1887) stresses, is the ultimate and distinguishing character of persuasive discourse. Presaging Kenneth Burke by a half-century, Genung states that the speaker must identify with and appeal to the audience's "motives." The motives are an intermediate factor between the audience's emotions and the audience's actions. Genung explains that "men cannot escape them, nor is it in the power of the soul deliberately to forswear them." In a note, he says that "in the universal practical mind of men, motiveless ideas either belong to the irresponsible vagaries of madness, or are the mere riot of invention" (Genung 1887, 464).

Not forsaking moral issues, Genung (1887) briefly dismisses evil motives with the offhand comment that any cause using evil motives would be led to "deserved destruction" (464). This noble sentiment was, perhaps, more plausible in the era before Hitler's brilliantly successful rhetoric. Genung does not catalogue the motives, but offers three categories into which they might fall:

> Duty to ourselves,—
>
> self-respect, prudence reputation, integrity, and the like;
>
> Duty to our kind,—
>
> which includes also duty to country and common weal;
>
> Duty to God,—
>
> which comprises the highest and worthiest spiritual virtues.
>
> (Genung 1887, 465)

This system reflects the typical morality of late nineteenth-century America. Yet in no way is it intended to be a complete list, as shortly afterwards Genung gives examples of motives that do not clearly fall into any of these categories, for example, the pecuniary motive (see Genung 1887, 467).

Genung (1887) promptly offers examples of various speeches employing various motives; these include quotations from Macauley (465), Edmund Burke (466), and Charles James Fox (467). Genung (1887) uses these to explicate various practical aspects of motive appeals, explaining that "the proposed action must be so placed before them as to coincide with their own desires and interests" (464). He stresses that appeals "to the will" must be implicit; otherwise "it is too much like compulsion." Indeed, he remarks that "it is futile *not* to base conduct or proposed action on motive (464).

Genung (1887) also discusses invective as a motive appeal (466). He does, however, put a positive spin on invective. He defines invective as "appeal in negative" and suggests that it can be used to shame an audience into acting on their higher motives: "Just as one may appeal to justice, patriotism, honest, benevolence, so he may inveigh against wrong, cowardice, meanness, selfishness" (Genung 1887, 466). Continuing to advocate high-mindedness, Genung (1887) advises that "the wise orator, therefore, who can seize the occasion, will seek to base his cause on motives that are both good *and* practical" (468).

One notices through the above discussion Genung's increasing reliance on concepts of oral discourse. This becomes explicit in the very last section of *Practical Elements*, which looks at oratory. Genung (1887) also reiterates that "the form that persuasion takes in literature, being almost altogether oral address, is oratory" (468). Here, Genung clarifies that oratory is a branch of literature, and yet of a different purpose than written literature.

Genung analyzes several characteristics of oratory. The first of these is eloquence, which Genung explains in a subhead as "the Sum of the Oratoric Style." He hesitantly categorizes eloquence "as impassioned prose." He continues that "to true eloquence so many things are essential—the character of the orator, his skill in swaying the emotions and sentiments of an audience, the greatness of subject and occasion—that a brief definition is impossible" (Genung 1887, 469).

Genung stresses that eloquence does not require a high style. Instead, "it is simply wise to take advantage of occasion." He points out certain sorts of figures that are inappropriate in spoken style. Presaging Winans' view that public speaking is like conversation (Winans 1917, 20-25), Genung states the ideal of eloquence to be "dignified conversation, grappling closely and earnestly with the important issues of life." Furthermore, he distinguishes the practical impulse of oratory, pointing out that even great flourishes of eloquence are "still at the impulsion of a practical end" (Genung 1887, 470-471). In this comment, Genung

foreshadows Wichelns' insistence that the purpose of oratory is not beauty but effect (Wichelns 1925, 209).

Genung (1887) advocates that speakers should offer simple arguments "wherein there is only one step from premise to conclusion" and that example and analogy are most typical of oratory. He insists that an argument in an oration should be offered with "its own practical application" (472).

Genung (1887) concludes *Practical Elements* with a classification of the different sorts of orations. One could certainly argue that Aristotle's three genres, the demonstrative, forensic, and epideictic, reflect the common practices of Athenian oratory (as Kennedy 1991 suggests, 7-9). Genung's classification, which appears to be at least in part original, reflects what he perceives to be the most common kinds of oratory of his time and place. The first of his two categories, "determinate oratory," is that which "contemplates direct and immediate action as its result." He divides determinate oratory into "oratory of the law, or forensic oratory," which "is concerned with the general end of justice and right." The second type of determinate oratory is "the oratory of legislative assemblies." He seems to deplore that "parliamentary debate is becoming more and more a matter of business." Political speaking, in Genung's view, is a sub-classification of legislative oratory, although "sometimes more fiery and ambitious." Also in the category of determinate oratory is "Oratory of the pulpit," which "is concerned with the general end of inducing men to follow Christ." Such oratory, Genung advises, should not "wander too far from a definite and immediate

issue" lest it lose its effect (472-473). Genung ignores non-Christian religious oratory.

Genung's second category is "demonstrative oratory," which is "that class of orations wherein no defined end is directly proposed," but which attempts to uplift the audience "toward noble, patriotic, and honorable sentiments, and toward a large and worthy life." He refers to such standard examples of epideictic oratory as Webster's Bunker Hill oration and Everett's speech on Washington (Genung 1887, 473). Genung's views on demonstrative oratory are surprisingly modern. He says that demonstrative oratory "is, or may be made, a great educator" (Genung 1887, 473-474; cf. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1960, 49-51). Genung says that the voters often need to be reminded of the loftier sentiments as they choose on public matters. Alas, Genung concludes that "the work is now mostly done by journalism; but the orator's field is by no means closed, nor will it be, so long as men delight in the living voice, the warmth of eloquence, and the presence of influential men" (Genung 1887, 474). Thus, even in his praise of demonstrative oratory, Genung's gaze seemed to turn, in ever so subtle a manner, more to the written than to the oral. That is, he seemed to hold that the newspapers and magazines were performing the function of the orator, while still not being prepared to concede that oral discourse had lost either its importance or its aesthetic quality.

In his later work, *Working Principles of Rhetoric*, Genung (1900) revises his view of oratory. An interesting distinction is that he reorganizes the discussion to

consider oratory into a chapter about argumentation. He characterizes oratory as "the summit and crown of the rhetorical art" (642). He defines oratory as "public discourse of the argumentative type, in which truth of personal import and issue is presented and enforced" (642). He still holds to the view that oratory concerns matters "of personal import" (643). He indicates that oratory belongs to the "literary type" of argumentation. Since it is argumentation of "a modified, more impassioned character," one can call it "persuasion" (643).

Genung (1900) continues to rely on faculty psychology, distinguishing between "The Appeal to the Intellect" (651), "The Appeal to the Emotions" (654), and "The Appeal to the Will" (657). He advocates that an orator must appeal to the will "indirectly" by appealing to the audience's motives (Genung 1900, 658).

By this time, Genung's (1900) concept of audience analysis has become more sophisticated. Abandoning the study of the audience member's physique, he further develops the importance of an "alliance" with the audience (Genung 1900, 645). He concludes that "An accomplished orator has by native endowment, and heightens by determinate culture, a power to read his audience, and to adapt himself instinctively to them." He states, furthermore, that the methods of understanding an audience involve "a magnetism, which cannot be acquired by rule and whose source is not fully understood" (Genung 1900, 647). It is difficult to imagine a student of Cicero or Quintilian making such an admission, which, for all practical purposes, forsakes any attempt at a theory of audience analysis. Cicero (1999) does, of course, note the importance of natural

ability in the orator's development (sec. 122-123, p. 85). Thus, although Genung offers some excellent advice to the speaker, that advice did not include specific tools.

Developing an understanding of the audience, Genung, however, asserts the importance of a simple style that suits "popular apprehension." Genung's (1900) "ideal" requires the speaker "to use up as little of the hearer's energy as possible in merely understanding" (653). He also points out the benefit of repetition. Although they show little respect for the audience, these comments foreshadow the conversational approach to public speaking education. Most interestingly, in this later version, Genung perceives more precisely the importance of argumentation and exposition as fundamental to oratory (652-653). Realizing the importance of credibility, Genung (1900) writes that "the initiative . . . must be such as to inspire confidence both in him as an able and honest man, and in his subject as he presents it" (646).

Genung's view, especially prominent in his earlier work, that written literature is typically expository while spoken literature is typically persuasive seems quite strange a century later. Under the influence of Kenneth Burke, many modern rhetoricians see all forms of human discourse, including essays, poems, and even quite exotic events, as being rhetorical in one sense or other (see, e.g., Burke 1969, 9-10, 116-123). Genung clearly recognizes the importance of persuasion, audience analysis, and the like, but employs minimal scholarly tools to develop them theoretically or pedagogically. This was both bad and good: bad

because it deprives the student of the techniques necessary for effective public speaking, but good, to a degree, because Genung started the task of developing a uniquely North American framework for oratory unimpeded by ancient models.

Although his discussion of oratory displays knowledge of Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric,* Genung largely attempted to construct a theory of oratorical persuasion from scratch. Most notably, the discussions of oratory, persuasion, and argumentation nestle in short sections near the back of the books, clearly subordinate to Genung's methodical discussion of writing style. In one sense, Genung could be commended for discussing speech in a book about rhetoric. In the context of his tradition, this alone may stand as a significant contribution. Yet, he does not integrate his discussion of oratory with the discussion of grammar and style in the larger part of his books. Although Genung perceived differences between the oral and the written, the work as a whole clearly stresses rhetoric as verbal expression. Thus, Genung's work stands in the tradition of Blair and Campbell, but takes steps, perhaps tentative steps, toward the dramatic resurgence of oratorical studies that was to arise in the United States in a few years.

Works such as Genung's, which subordinated oratory to literature, and did so without clear theoretical reason, set the stage for the dramatic resurgence of oratorical theory and teaching that occurred in the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Lyon (1915) advocated "a clear-cut division" between English and speech in universities (44). This may have, in part,

been a rebellion against an approach that subordinated speech to literature. Suggesting that college students be taught an extemporaneous method of speaking, Robinson (1915) stated that "The boy must not be subjected to the danger of falling back of [*sic*] those eighteenth-century models of composition which he learned to follow in high school" (223). The time had come to rebuild the theory of oral discourse on a new foundation. Nonetheless, Genung's emphasis clearly endured in the continuing stress on naturalness and clarity of expression. Genung pointed out the importance of analyzing and adapting to the audience, even though he lacked tools to explain how to do so. He broke free of the genres of Aristotle, thus opening the opportunity to examine the kinds of speeches typical of North American culture. Thus, even after rhetoricians returned to classical models, a uniquely North American approach to spoken rhetoric had arrived.

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