

## Reviews

*The Rhetoric of Berkeley's Philosophy*, Peter Walmsley, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 189pp.

In his 1889 book, *A History of Eighteenth Century Literature*, the prominent English critic Edmund Gosse remarked in the section devoted to Berkeley that,

In this place no attempt can be made to sketch Berkeley's contributions to thought. We have only to deal with him as a writer. In this capacity we may note that the abstruse nature of his contributions to literature has unduly concealed the fact that Berkeley is one of the most exquisite of all writers of English prose. Among the authors who will find a place in the present volume, it may perhaps be said that there is not one who is quite his equal in style.

Given the talents of Berkeley's competitors here - Addison, Defoe, Swift, Fielding, Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon, Burke, etc. - this is immense praise indeed from Gosse; but he is perfectly correct about the matter of recognition. Berkeley's talent as a writer has been "unduly concealed". Peter Walmsley's *The Rhetoric of Berkeley's Philosophy*, originally a 1988 Ph.D thesis for the Department of English in Cambridge, and now published as a title in the series Cambridge Studies in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Thought, is actually the very first book-length assessment of Berkeley as a writer. There have, until now, been only essays, particularly those by Donald Davie, and the odd section of a book, such as that in John Richetti's *Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (1983). This despite the fact that, as Walmsley points out in his Introduction, Berkeley was welcomed as a man of letters by London's literary circle in 1712, was courted by such luminaries as Swift, Pope, Addison and Steele, the latter of whom persuaded him to contribute some papers to *The Guardian*, and was throughout his life considered a knowledgeable literary critic. Walmsley's book is a well researched, scrupulously detailed analysis of Berkeley's four major texts - the *Principles*, the *Three Dialogues*, *Alciphron*, and

*Siris*. Each is analysed in terms of its form, its mode of presentation, its style and its rhetorical method. In analysing these published texts he also draws upon early manuscript drafts, the *Philosophical Commentaries*, the correspondence, the literature of the period, the curricula of Trinity College Dublin, and details of Berkeley's private library. It is all highly informative, and impresses upon the reader that Berkeley was at all times and on all points a prose stylist, who understood that "...in Metaphysiques & Ethiques... the dry strigose way will not suffice", and that he should "...correct my Language & make it as Philosophically nice as possible". (p. 16)

The book does more, however, than establish that Berkeley was an accomplished author of lucid prose, who built structures of effective imagery and who proved a master of each of the literary genres he turned his hand to - the treatise, the dialogue, and the essay. It also argues for a deeper understanding of Berkeley's theory of language, and the manner in which Berkeley put it to use. As is known, Berkeley broke free of Locke's ideational theory of language, arguing in the *Principles* that language had ends other than the communication of ideas, such as "the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, the putting of the mind in some particular disposition" (p.18). Walmsley argues that this is an "explicitly rhetorical" (p.29) theory of language, and throughout the book he tries to show that Berkeley used the forms and devices of classical rhetoric and disputation in his works. The different sections of the *Principles*, for example, roughly fall into the conventional 'parts' of classical rhetoric: the "Introduction" is the exordium, which establishes Berkeley's *persona*. The "Idealism" section is the first half of the *amplificatio*, or positive proof. The "Objections and replies" section is the *refutatio*, or extensive passage of refutation. The "Consequences of idealism" section, is the second half of the *amplificatio*. And throughout the work, Berkeley uses the device of *prolepsis*, or the anticipation of an objection. The *Three Dialogues* and *Alciphron*, to provide another example, are both modelled on the Platonic form of dialogue, which, as Walmsley points out, was unpopular at the time (in general, Ciceronian

models prevailed.) They both use the device of *elenchus*, which is outlined as follows: "One student, who accepts the role of answerer, states a thesis. Another then attempts to refute this thesis, not by direct argument or evidence, but by asking a series of simple questions. To each question the answerer may only reply 'yes' or 'no'. The questioner's aim is to force the answerer to contradict his initial statement." (p. 69) Berkeley had been trained in the use of this device as an undergraduate, and was to preside over students' use of it as a Junior Greek Lecturer in Trinity.

The book could perhaps have done with a short chapter dealing with the *Guardian* "papers" and occasional essays (e.g. *An Essay towards preventing the Ruin of Great Britain*), as opposed to merely discussing aspects of them in the course of other chapters, and there appears to be no reason for the absence of chapters on the *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, *The Querist*, *The Analyst*, or *A Defense of Free-Thinking in Mathematics*, other than considerations of length and the possibility of repetition. It is, however, a valuable contribution to the scholarship, and hopefully should result in Berkeley being granted his long overdue place in the literary pantheon.

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