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Review: William Fitzgerald's Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance

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William Fitzgerald, *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. x+158 pp. ISBN 9780271056227

Spiritual Modalities is an extremely useful book. It not only explores in depth the rhetorical power of prayer; it also provides abundant hermeneutic resources for the further study of this ancient yet still contemporary speech

act genre. Creatively employing Kenneth Burke's dramatism as an interpretive lens, William Fitzgerald has written a detailed post-secular analysis that reveals prayer as an embodied performance, a cognitive scene of address, a material act of invocation, and a social attitude of reverence. Historians of rhetoric might question Fitzgerald's claim that his book is "the first systematic study of prayer in relation to rhetoric" (3) and place it instead within the loose tradition of rhetorics of prayer (sometimes anachronistically called *artes orandi*) that stretches back to William of Auvergne's *Rhetorica divina* and Erasmus's *Modus orandi Deum*. Nonetheless, *Spiritual Modalities* is certainly a significant contribution to the ongoing religious turn in rhetorical studies and the human sciences more generally.

One of the most impressive things about *Spiritual Modalities* is that Fitzgerald achieves many critical and theoretical goals simultaneously and thus his book can be used in different ways by different readers. For example, he analyzes prayer as a specific rhetorical genre and also employs it as a general meta-rhetorical framework. Rhetorical critics of prayer will value the rich illustrations of specific readings of prayers as texts, while rhetorical theorists will discover new insights into the prayerful quality of all rhetorical performances. One reason Fitzgerald can accomplish so much in his book is that he proposes a capacious and suggestive definition of *prayer* to begin with. Prayer for Fitzgerald is a discursive art requiring human capacities with language that enable complex relationships with otherworldly audiences. Prayer is "the human side of any human-divine encounter" and therefore involves an asymmetrical and one-way mode of address even when it is viewed within a dialogic relation (34–35).

Fitzgerald enriches his definition of prayer through an exploration of Burke's dramatism, ingeniously employing the revised motivational hexad of act, agent, agency, purpose, scene, and attitude. His strong thinking with Burke represents a concrete demonstration of how Fitzgerald critically examines prayer as a rhetorical genre and theorizes all rhetoric as having a prayerful dimension. Burke's dramatism offers a vocabulary for analyzing the performative complexity of even the simplest prayer–prayer as rhetoric—and for underlining the prayerful aspects of all effective language use—rhetoric as prayer. For Burke, prayer has the purpose of shaping character by disposing actors to perform actions.

In his first chapter Fitzgerald builds on the Burkean notion of literature as experiential equipment to develop a framework for prayer as a situated space of "rehearsal for living" (22). He proposes an axial model for describing this situated space of prayerful rhetoric: a horizontal axis encompassing human-to-human exchanges and a vertical axis mapping human-to-divine relations. Prayerful actions always involve both dimensions. Within those dimensions, we can see prayer as "par excellence a 'rhetoric of situation,' a means for discerning and articulating placement, both in the particularity of immediate circumstance and in the broader cosmos, where discovering one's place is the basis for ethical action" (12). Prayer thus becomes a rhetorical act that shapes character by orienting its performers toward future habits that represent their best communicative selves.

The next three chapters turn from prayer as situation to prayer as strategy in terms of three Burkean motives (scene, act, purpose). In treating prayer as a scene of address, Fitzgerald elaborates on the range of audiences present—human (including oneself) and divine—and how they are present. Dealing with prayer as a speech act, he locates its performative center in the rhetorical process of invocation, a calling upon some person or power to be present; in the course of his discussion, he briefly treats the ethics of invocation in the work Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion. In grounding prayer in an attitude of reverence, Fitzgerald foregrounds the psychosomatic dimension of prayer, its character as embodied performance, and the pious manner of that performance in the Burkean sense of piety: a sense of what is proper to the situation, in this case, the “gracious acceptance of hierarchal relations” (9). Fitzgerald illustrates his point through a contextualized reading of the Kwakiutl “Prayer to the Sockeye Salmon.”

After these three chapters organized around Burkean motives, Fitzgerald presents two chapters focused on the sometimes neglected fourth and fifth canons of classical rhetoric. He first views prayer as a rhetorical art of memory and reads a Catholic prayer, the *Memorare*, as an illustration of prayer’s rhetorical functioning as communication and commemoration. He next interprets prayer as delivery within the virtual context of contemporary cyberspace and provocatively argues that online prayer websites “actualize the logic already implicit in prayer as a virtual site of delivery” (128).

In his conclusion Fitzgerald turns to the topic and perspective of prayer in future rhetorical studies. “Does rhetoric have a prayer?” Fitzgerald asks. His affirmative answer includes suggestions for further exploration along the paths of rhetorical inquiry he has opened up. For example, having interpreted prayer primarily as a rhetoric of praise, he notes that one might alternatively read prayer as supplication or confession, a shift in emphasis that could result in quite different critical, theoretical, and historical conclusions. Fitzgerald’s grounding of prayer in the attitude of reverence presents another opportunity for further research: “A future focus for rhetoric is to locate and interrogate scenes of reverence in religious and secular guise and to advance a broader understanding of the place of reverence in human and divine affairs” (135). Though he does not point this out, Fitzgerald’s analyses also offer tools for historians of rhetoric examining past developments of prayer as a genre in different places and periods, and those same analyses demonstrate the way an understanding of the prayerful dimension of all discourse can affect rhetorical historiography more generally. For instance, Fitzgerald’s critical and theoretical perspectives on prayer can be developed by rhetorical historians of emotions to tell a different tale about how past rhetoricians have dealt with piety and pieties, with the affective disposition of habitual reverence and with the residue of such habits in the institutionally-protected practices of devotion. Armed with Fitzgerald’s dramatistic perspective on prayer and technology, historians of rhetoric can reinterpret past media revolutions and their ethical and political implications. These and other research opportunities suggest

that Fitzgerald is correct in predicting that future rhetorical study does indeed have a prayer.

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