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Presentation of the book by PETER CARRAVETTA  
***The Elusive Hermes. Method, Discourse, Interpreting.***  
Aurora (CO), Davies Publishing, 2012, 476 pp.

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It is an honor to introduce Peter Carravetta, and to have the chance to talk about him.

He is a scholar of extraordinary training and scope. He was born in Calabria and came to the US in the sixties at age 12. For a long time during his youth he wanted to be a scientist, and spent the first three years of college at CCNY majoring in physics. During the turmoil of the early seventies, he explored other fields, settling at the time for literature and criticism (French, Italian, American). He soon explored other fields, including hermeneutics, history of ideas and literary and cultural studies, postmodernism and migrations. He studied phenomenology and social theory at the University of Bologna, linguistics with one of Jacobson's students at the University of Chicago, and philosophy and comparative literature at the New School, taking seminars with Derrida, Foucault, and others. He received his PhD in French & Italian Studies from the New School in 1983, so exactly 30 years ago. Readers on his committee included the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, and Paolo Valesio, the enfant prodige of Italian linguistics.

Carravetta taught at CUNY for over twenty years before coming to SB, and has been visiting (as exchange prof or as a Fulbright scholar) at universities in Rome, Madrid, Paris, Nanjing, Columbia and Middlebury. He is currently Alfonse M. D'Amato Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies at SUNY/Stony Brook. Perhaps to counter the rigor of the various methodologies he learned, he is also a poet, and the author of seven books in two languages.

The book we are celebrating is the last one, **The Elusive Hermes**. It is the first volume of a four-book project. The second volume, which exists in manuscript, is dedicated to method and interpretation in Italy during the Cold War years, he is working on the third volume, and the fourth volume is the English translation of *Del Postmoderno*. He is also at work on a collection of his writings on Italian American culture, and a book on migration and colonialism.

We will have two commentators on the book, myself and Nanda Golden, a graduate student in the Philosophy Department who works on rhetoric, followed by an elaboration by Peter Carravetta himself.

I will go first. Introducing myself, I am Robert Crease, a professor in the philosophy department.

In the Introduction to *The Elusive Hermes*, Peter Carravetta says that his project is "fairly ambitious." Is it ever! The book is a sustained investigation into rhetoric and its interrelationships with method and theory -- and not just in the current state. The inquiry covers the full historical sweep from the pre-Socratics, through Plato and Aristotle, through Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes and the emergence of early modern science, through Hegel, Husserl, Peirce, to modern Continental philosophy and figures like

Gadamer and Ricoeur. And it treats not just philosophers but literary theorists as well. It is a monumental achievement. And this is only the FIRST of FOUR volumes!

The book is so thorough and comprehensive that it is difficult to figure out how to begin to talk about it. What's a commentator to do? Words fail. Which is ironic to say about a book concerned with rhetoric.

By way of introducing the book, let me first outline several of its features that I particularly appreciate. Then I'll sharpshoot from the margins a bit, from my own particular standpoint, and indicate a spot where I thought more elaboration would be valuable.

A first thing that I greatly appreciated about *The Elusive Hermes* was the way Peter put a long string of thinkers in one tradition. Intellectual history does not consist of individuals, one after the other, with different visions, who dispense different kinds of wisdom. Instead, it's a series of thinkers who are responding to what they inherited, who are discontent with the mismatch between the language and concepts they've inherited and what they experience, and who struggle to develop new words and ideas to capture that experience. But these new words and ideas are inevitably imperfect themselves, and encrusted with traces of their origins.

Wittgenstein, writing about his work, once remarked that "My account will be hard to follow: because it says something new but still has eggshells from the old view sticking to it." It's a wonderful image. Ideas don't fall out of the sky. Intellectual history always has eggshells, as new ideas emerge encrusted by the context that gave birth to them. Peter's tale allows us to see and appreciate those eggshells -- as they are created by one generation of thinkers and discarded by the next, who respond to new circumstances, and create, brush up against, and then find themselves having to break, new shells.

Second, Peter covers these thinkers in detail. I learned a lot, of what to me were what our politicians call unknown unknowns: things I didn't know I didn't know. One tiny example. I'd always brooded uneasily over Bacon's description of what he called Idols of the Cave, or that brand of sophism which is different for each individual, which arise from the individual's background and training. I'd assumed that Bacon was alluding of course to the Ur-cave, the cave in Book VII of Plato's *Republic*, the most famous cave in philosophical history. But this didn't quite fit, for Plato's Cave induces sophisms that affect the entire community, and thus resembles more what Bacon called Idols of the Tribe. But on P. 192, in an off-hand remark, Peter notes that Bacon is actually alluding to a fragment by Heraclitus, in which he refers to people living as if in a world all of their own. This instantly resolved the strange feeling I had. I get it now! Comprehensive erudition like that makes me feel like an amateur in my own discipline.

A third thing I appreciated about the book is its overall approach. I confess, as someone who regards Heidegger as providing the most insightful and extensive interpretation of the philosophical tradition to date, that my first impression of Peter's book is that, in a sense, Hermes is an avatar for what Heidegger called Being. In the final two paragraphs of the book, that is, Peter describes Hermes is neither deity nor human, someone who cannot be constrained or cordoned off, someone who has been bowdlerized and pulverized, someone able to subvert the intended content of language, but who gives birth to meaning, everywhere and nowhere at all times. Hermes is perpetual metamorphosis, the endless manifesting of being-there itself. You see what I mean about the connection between Hermes and Being. But whatever

Peter thinks of this comparison, what he is doing is different in an important way. While Heidegger is interested in the history of Being, Peter is interested in the history of beings. Because he is, Peter gives us tools for doing actual social and intellectual history that Heidegger does not.

Fourth, Peter's book recalls for us an appreciation for what rhetoric really is. Today, we think of rhetoric as synonymous with advertising or campaign literature. We tend to think of rhetoric as what PR employees do to get people to buy the products, or vote for the candidates, who hired these PR people. Back in the day, for Aristotle for instance, rhetoric was: 1) something done by people who were practically wise; 2) aimed to lead people who do not see what is in their best interest to see what is in their best interest; 3) produced good citizens. Peter recalls that meaning, and describes its evolution over time. He aims, as it were -- to use science-speak -- at a grand unified theory of rhetoric. This grand unification is embodied in Figure 7 on p. 38, in which he schematizes the relation between theory, discourse, and method over time. Rhetoric and method, he says, are recto and verso of the same discursive process. Along with this comes an interdependence of metaphysics – of claims about Being – and interpretation or method; of ontology and epistemology, being and knowing.

Fifth, Peter identifies the key moment where the misunderstanding of rhetoric, and the beginning of its devaluing and marginalization, began. This was the rise of modern science, which was accompanied by a dehiscence, a separation, between doing science and talking about it. Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes were the principals. Bacon, Peter writes, split Discourse into two roles: Sign and Rhetoric. Sign was the language of the new science, while Rhetoric was the language of public exchange, which Bacon used to cultivate appreciation for science among an educated corps of public managers. Galileo, meanwhile, also found it necessary to introduce a schism, between entities that are best captured in mathematical symbols, and beings that are perceived -- a schism that, Peter writes, "wreaks havoc in the palace of metaphysics." Descartes, meanwhile, found it necessary to split up mathesis, constructing a theory of physical knowledge and a parallel theory of metaphysical knowledge.

This triad of thinkers not only split Discourse into two roles, but interpretation as well: one role involved the language of nature and physical phenomena, the other the language about nature, concerned with its value for society. They split, or appeared to split, according to Peter, method and rhetoric.

Now, all three thinkers were responders. All three were believing Christians, yet also responding to the obvious and undeniable promise of the new scientific and mathematical developments at the time. Each struggled to express how these developments could be understood within a broader social context: Bacon, within a mythical understanding of nature; Galileo, within the church's understanding; Descartes, by the prevailing philosophy. Each thinker had to do two things: 1) show what this new scientific and mathematical knowledge was; and 2) express it rhetorically in terms people would understand. The response of all three was to protect the new science by surrounding it with an eggshell, so to speak, allowing it to develop within the world but also apart from it, showing how it could be pursued while setting aside questions of history and value. Bacon's eggshell principally involved experiment, Galileo's measurement, and Descartes method. Three different tacks, by different people in three different countries, making space for something very similar. "Focus *here*," they said, "and leave *that* to the background; you don't have to work about that right now." Thus Bacon's split between Sign and

Rhetoric, Galileo's image of the two books which had the same author, and Descartes' method. This was the beginning of what Charles Taylor calls "the immanent frame," nature as we can study it without reference to the purposes, plans, and designs of humans and the rest of the universe. There's something beyond rhetoric. The lesson seemed to be, you don't have to pay attention to what's outside the eggshell. Physics and metaphysics, the scientific and the lived world were beginning to come apart. It reached an extreme form in the Vienna Circle, whose manifesto -- which clearly and ironically and blatantly embodies a social and cultural agenda -- announces the search for "a neutral system of formulae, for a symbolism freed from the slag of historical languages."

We still live in the shadow of the schism that resulted, and even view it as second-nature. Its effects include the task of convincing politicians how to regard scientific discourse about things like evolution, climate, and human health as actually relevant to the human good. Peter seeks to recapture the moment when this schism first appeared, and regards it as not an advance beyond rhetoric, but something to be incorporated within his grand unified theory of rhetoric.

Scientists have always had an ambivalent view of language, tending to regard what they are addressing as something beyond language. Let me illustrate with a few of my favorite stories to that effect.

One is story about Richard Feynman, who one day found himself stymied with a colleague, as he tried again and again to describe an idea, only to have the colleague poke holes in Feynman's description. "Damn it!" Feynman finally said in exasperation. "Don't listen to what I say, listen to what I MEAN!"

Another story involves a conversation between Robert Oppenheimer and his student Wendell Furry. As reported in Monk's new biography of Oppenheimer:

"Once they paused on a corner while Oppenheimer threw up his arms and said, 'Wendell, you *have* to rationalize everything. You seem to be completely incapable of understanding anything that cannot be put into words.' Furry smiled, gratified by the remark. Oppenheimer rocked back and roared at him, 'I didn't mean that as a compliment.'"

And last month, I attended a conference on mathematics and art, and spoke about to what extent equations might be characterized as beautiful in a deep and robust way. Sitting in the front row of the audience was a friend who was an astrophysicist. I asked him what he thought afterwards. He said, "You had some good ideas, but in the end what you were talking about is just language." We know what he meant; issues of beauty are ultimately undecidable. Mind you, it's not that he was insisting that truth had to concern real, experimentally decidable things. He had heard and contributed to talks on kinds of Moebius strips, properties of infinite polyhedra, and features of imaginary mathematical objects. But beauty to him was "just language." The point is that this distinction between what's scientific and what's "just language" came naturally to him -- and however hermeneutically trained we are, we still sense it in our guts.

It's at this point that I want to challenge Peter and ask if what is happening here is so easily incorporated in a grand unified theory of rhetoric as your book makes it seem. What is happening at this moment

when a gap seems to appear between something to be addressed that is independent of human beings, and the words that humans use to address it? How does this fit within that schematic diagram on p. 38?

Science, that is, seems to have discovered a way to opt out of rhetoric. The Newtonian revolution involved the recognition that, by making certain kinds of assumptions, we can examine nature as if like the inside of a fishbowl. The fishbowl is created when we assume that the only entities that exist are masses, that the only thing these masses do is move, and that they move only under the influence of forces. With these simple assumptions – and a set of instruments and equipment to create the fishbowl -- we find ourselves with a powerful tool of prediction capable of formulating an enormous number of practically applicable laws about how the universe works.

To be sure, we get into trouble when we forget that this fishbowl is an abstraction, and succumb to the temptation to mistake it for reality itself -- this was Husserl's point in the *Crisis*. We get into trouble, that is -- to change back the metaphor -- when we become too enamored of the interior of the fishbowl -- the inside of the eggshell, and think that we no longer need the wall, or the shell. Another way of getting into trouble is to forget that what's in the fishbowl has been created by our instruments and equipment, so what we see is partially though not entirely and not in all circumstances a function of them. This is Bohr's famous point about the uncertainty principle, which is but a variation on the phenomenological idea of the noetic-noematic correlation.

But if those kinds of mistakes are not made, is it not true that the sciences have discovered a way out? Many scientists clearly think so, and many humanists seem content to let them get away with it.

Peter is, rightly I think, not content with this, suggesting on pp. 19-20 that scientists have not fully appreciated the hermeneutic character of their work, but also that humanists have not appreciated how scientific method is operating in the humanities as well -- or at least the dreadful consequences of their ignoring the sciences. Many philosophers, including Gadamer himself, simply opt out of discussing science. It's not what they are concerned with, they say. Meanwhile, we've become educated in a system that respects this schism, so we don't notice it. Don Ihde has called attention to the binary present in contemporary thought, in which Continental philosophy has ceded to Analytic philosophy the task of providing an account of science, and Analytic philosophy has ceded to Continental philosophy the task of interpreting texts.

Peter seems to be saying it's important not to accept this binary. He seems to have a deeper conception of rhetoric in which it encompasses both science and humanities. But how exactly does this work?

One possible way to do this is, as Peter notes, is to point to the presence of rhetoric in scientific papers, which do regularly contain traditional rhetorical figures such as examples, demonstration, and invention. But this can't be all of it, for this is only about the papers themselves. Another way, as Peter notes on p. 307, is to point to indications of the lack of veridicality and certitude within science itself, as revealed by the work of people like Einstein and Heisenberg. But their work still takes place on the Newtonian stage, in connection with deviations from predictions made on that stage in certain remote and highly confined areas – and if you bear in mind, as Bohr insisted, the entire equipmental context, you don't get into

trouble. Still another way, as on p. 250 Peter shows Husserl does, is to point to the creative and metaphoric aspects of methodic research, without which science cannot thrive.

But these are not enough, I think. For something in the theoretical discourse itself seems, at least, to resist rhetoric, and seems to legitimate attempts to cordon it off.

Peter Galison, for instance, has pointed out how rigid theoretical discourse is, especially in fields such as theoretical physics. "You try adding a minus sign to a term" in a theory, he says, but you can't, because the theory then violates parity. You try to compensate by adding a term with more particles, but that's forbidden because the theory now becomes nonrenormalizable. You try to compensate by leaving a particle out, and other particles that you need vanish. Many theories are like that, he says -- you can't tweak them very much, or some phenomena that you want become impossible to posit, while others that you don't want become impossible to avoid.

The fishbowl, in short, seems cordoned off from rhetoric. We seem able to stand outside and describe what we see of its contents, bearing in mind the full instrumental context. And when we stand outside it's in a particular time and place -- we are not "spectators from nowhere" --- and we talk about its contents. When we do so, we are "real-life interpreters", always speaking from someplace, not outside a play of interpretation. But what we see in the fishtank is a special kind of seeing. Furthermore, when we talk about what's in the fishtank, we know that there will be more people watching other fishtanks that will be built in the future, and that other people in the past viewed similar phenomena as what we do in their fishtanks; this makes it an open-ended kind of seeing.

This kind of scientific discourse is therefore very different from the kind of discourse that usually goes on in the lifeworld. It involves something akin to what Heidegger calls formal indication: an indicative kind of rhetoric. Formal indication is of course present in the lifeworld -- Heidegger developed it to discuss notions like care -- but it is more pronounced in science. It involves not just discourse, but a special kind of relation between our discourse and what we are trying to address with it.

I wonder whether a kind of phenomenology, in short, isn't required to make the grand unified theory of rhetoric work -- a special kind of account of how we grasp what we do in language, something like formal indication. Only this, I think, accounts for how we can understand the scientific and technological enframing of the scientific revolution in a way to exhibit the interdependence of being and interpreting.

Still, let me repeat my appreciation for what Peter has accomplished. As a humanist, he is rightfully annoyed at the ignorance of scientists about the relevance of rhetoric for their work. As scientifically trained, he is rightfully annoyed at the ignorance of humanists about the relevance of science for their work, and the persistence of wrong models about science. Peter tries to heal the split between the ancients and the moderns. He is merely afraid that today's humanists are armed only with 20<sup>th</sup> century tools, and looks forward to a 21st century humanities will be up to date on these science issues.