

Theory and Practice in Rudolph Agricola

Abstract

The rhetorical tradition had stressed the importance of practice as a corrective to theory, but the idea of practice is even more central to Agricola than to other writers. This paper examines Agricola's discussions of, and instructions for practice, and it considers his use of his own theories in the *Oration on Christ's Nativity* and *De inventione dialectica*.

Among the rich *copia* of present day studies in rhetoric one can pick out two streams which correspond roughly to the opposites of my title, theory and practice. Corresponding to theory are the close philological studies of the classic texts, in which Cicero's or Aristotle's various uses of a key term are compared in the hope of establishing the precise meaning of each term and each pronouncement. Scholars who espouse this method assume that their heroes use language with the same precision and consistency as they do themselves. On the opposite side, corresponding to practice are those who study the effects of rhetorical training on oratory, or on practices of reading and writing. Advocates of this second approach assert that rhetoric was always a training for practical life, never a rigorous set of axioms. The problem for this school is that much of what we assume is incapable of proof. It is impossible to say that a particular writer had read, agreed with, and in a specific case followed, a certain manual. Beyond this we have to fall back on what Gombrich has called 'Hegelianism without the metaphysics'.¹

In this paper I shall first examine Agricola's remarks on the relationship between theory and practice, not without the occasional nod to philology, and then I shall consider the extent to which he puts into practice his principles of dialectical invention when composing his own works.

But before I perform this *Aufhebung*, I want to reflect a little on the question of theory and practice in the rhetorical tradition. More than any other subject, I suspect, the art of rhetoric has asked questions about the relationship between the precepts collected in the *artes* and the practice of the orator. In *De oratore*, for example, the question is raised as to whether there is such a thing as the art

¹ Gombrich 1969: 2-32.

of rhetoric.² Crassus replies that if by ‘art’ one means a science gathered out of materials which have been examined deeply and are plainly known, then there is no such art. The art of rhetoric consists not in firmly fixed rules but in ‘things which have been observed’ (*observata*) in the practice and method of speaking (*in usu ac ratione dicendi*) and things which have been noticed and noted down (*animadversa ac notata*) by men of skill and experience.³ The art of rhetoric, according to Crassus depends on the practice of speakers as observed by skilled practitioners. And even that pragmatic art is far less important in training an orator than natural talent and practice.⁴ It is tempting to see reluctance to trust rhetorical theory and the anxiety about whether or not rhetoric is an art at all, as Plato’s legacy to rhetoric. But we must also recognise the inoculative function of such manœuvres — by acknowledging restrictions on the value of precepts, and by pandering to Roman distrust of aimless Greek theorising, Cicero is apologetically establishing a space for the *techne* of rhetoric, to which he will devote the second and third books of his treatise. Quintilian performs the same manœuvre in the reverse order when, after providing exhaustive precepts for invention, he insists that the circumstances of the particular case are more important than any of the rules.⁵ In one way the reservations about rhetorical theory expressed by Cicero and Quintilian represent a sensible moderate position. They acknowledge that rhetoric has no dependable axioms, and that studying a textbook will not be enough to make someone eloquent, but they suggest that the distilled experience of successful orators will help people avoid mistakes and assist their learning. This sensible, moderate appearance enhances the attractiveness and reliability of the author. But it also paradoxically enhances the authority of the rules, because it implies that there can be nothing seriously wrong with rules that are constantly subject to modification in the light of particular circumstances. In fact this uncertainty about the status of rhetorical rules increased their resistance to change. In theory the rules of rhetoric are pragmatic and always open to alteration in the light of circumstances. In history, the enduring precepts of rhetoric were established very early on and were never in the manuals extensively revised or added to. I rather look forward to the day when I open a new number of *Rhetorica* and find an article on *Four New Tropes*.

But it would be wrong to think of rhetoric’s preoccupation with the question of theory and practice as purely tactical or as only paradoxical in effect. Unlike dialectic, rhetoric never lost touch with its basis in pedagogy. It retained a concern about the effectiveness of teaching which lead it to provide exercises and techniques for practice to back up the precepts. Thus in *De oratore* book 1, Crassus explains the importance of mock trials, of continual writing, wide reading, translation and imitation,⁶ while Quintilian devotes the whole of *Institutio oratoria* book 10 to a discussion of practice.

² Cicero, *De oratore*, I. 22. 102.

³ *De oratore*, I. 23. 107-109.

⁴ *De oratore*, I. 25. 113, 32. 145-147.

⁵ *Institutio oratoria*, V. 10. 100-110.

⁶ *De oratore*, I. 33. 149-34. 155.

This point leads on to the question of terminology. In English the word ‘practice’ can be opposed to ‘theory’ in two distinct ways. In one sense practice is a repetition and exercise of what one has learned, so for example I might ‘do my piano practice’ or ‘practice my cricket strokes’. In Latin this meaning would usually be conveyed by *exercitatio* but also on occasion by *consuetudo*, *usus* and *meditatio*.⁷ But English ‘practice’ can also mean actual work, ‘putting something into practice’, ‘practice what you preach’. This sense in Latin is normally conveyed by *usus* but it too can also be conveyed by *consuetudo*.⁸ *Usus* and its derivatives such as *utile* are often rather slippery terms, since one of the main purposes people have in proclaiming that what they do is ‘useful’ is to denigrate the activities of their predecessors as ‘useless’. So humanists often speak of the usefulness of their teaching of Latin as against the pointlessness of scholastic teaching. A scholastic would reasonably reply that his kind of Latin was useful in his profession.

In this paper I shall try to keep these two meanings of ‘practice’ reasonably well distinguished, but I want to insist that there is a relation between them. In some sense the benefits you derive from practice, in the sense of rehearsal, as part of education, are similar but inferior to the benefits accruing from experience or practice, in the sense of performance, in your work. In other words, *exercitatio* and *usus* have a similar function, tempering and enlarging the precepts through experience of some kind of actuality.⁹ We shall find some expression of these connections in Agricola’s vocabulary.

There is one further implication of practice, both *usus* and *exercitatio*, which we need to keep in view. The idea of practice implies some envisaged way of life, some activity or means of making a living - and this idea of life can change without the educational system making overt allowance for it. In Cicero the life envisaged is fairly clearly that of the *patronus*, trial lawyer and eminent senator, but in his latter years, such a way of life was no longer possible. Quintilian devotes much of his twelfth book to the life of the orator, but there is a large element of wishful thinking in his basically Ciceronian account. When Quintilian writes of practice it is a strangely literary kind of practice, in which improvements are made to Cicero’s speeches, or new approaches are found for traditional declamation subjects. And Agricola’s ideal of life? Well, we shall see.

Throughout *De inventione dialectica*, Agricola stresses the usefulness of what he is teaching, and treats use as the ultimate justification for any position that he takes up. Thus in the first chapter having established that all speech aims to teach something to a listener, that argument must be employed in teaching, and that some people find arguments more easily than others, he continues:

⁷ *Oxford Latin Dictionary* 1968-82, *exercitatio* 3: 641; Lausberg 1990: §6, and §1092.

⁸ *Oxford Latin Dictionary* 1968-82, *usus* 6: 2111; *De oratore*, 1.4.15. For *consuetudo* in both senses compare *De oratore*, 1.20.91 and 1.23.152.

⁹ Some of the earliest uses confirm this connection, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1.2.3: ‘exercitatio est assiduus usus consuetudoque.’

Therefore those people have done something most useful (*utilissimum*) who have devised the seats of arguments which they call topics; with whose aid, as if by certain signs, we can run through things in our mind and find whatever in each of them is convincing and suitable for what we wish to teach.¹⁰

Agricola calls the topics which are the core of his work and the subject of book one, 'most useful'. Some extra topics are justified because it is useful to have more than one way of finding a given connection,¹¹ while maxims are excluded because they are no use.¹² The subject of book two is the use (*usus*) of the topics and how to obtain from them resources for speaking (*facultas disserendi*).¹³ Although use is a primary theme and justification throughout the book, Agricola's main explicit discussion of the subject occurs in book III, chapter 16, *De usu et exercitatione*. This chapter is presented as a supplement to the book. Now that he has spoken about the whole of disposition and invention as clearly as possible, he reminds his readers that teaching and the method of art are not enough:

We find that it happens in all the arts which are taught for the sake of practice (*usus*) and experience (*actio*) that unless the precepts are strengthened by long familiarity (*consuetudo*) and much practice (*exercitatio*) they show more promise of future success than achievement in the present.¹⁴

Here *usus* and *actio* define the kind of art to which dialectic belongs, but dialectic teaching will not produce results without *consuetudo* and *exercitatio*. In this sentence *exercitatio* is most useful in those arts which eventually aim at *usus*. But although *consuetudo* can mean exercise as opposed to actual performance, its main sense of familiarity may suggest a link between *exercitatio* and *usus*. Agricola illustrates his point about the importance of practice with two comparisons. No matter how much a painter knows about colour, shadow and perspective,

unless he puts his hand to the panel, and tries many things, fails to bring off what he embarked on with high hopes, and first produces much work which must be condemned, he will never create works which later deserve praise.¹⁵

The example of painting is helpful to Agricola because it offers a clear separation between learning the theory and actually painting. But it is hard to decide whether the panel-painting he envisages is *exercitatio* or *usus*. The idea of start-

¹⁰ Agricola, *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 2 [= ed. Mundt 1992: 10]: 'utilissimum videntur fecisse, qui sedes quasdam argumentorum (quos locos dixerunt) excogitaverunt, quorum admonitu, velut signis quibusdam, circumferremus per ipsas res animum, et quid esset in unaquaque probabile aptumque instituto orationis nostrae perspiceremus.'

¹¹ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 110 [= ed. 1992: 126].

¹² *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 175-76 [= ed. 1992: 188].

¹³ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 182 [= ed. 1992: 206].

¹⁴ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 451 [= ed. 1992: 552]: 'Quod quidem in omnibus artibus, quae usus actionisque causa docentur, evenire videmus, ut nisi fuerint longa consuetudine et exercitatione multa firmata, futuri potius operis in agendis rebus spem, quam in praesentia subsidium praestent.'

¹⁵ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452 [= ed. 1992: 554]: 'nisi tamen ipse admoverit tabulae manum, et multa tentaverit, multam operam spe profectus perdiderit, multaque prius fecerit improbanda, ne faciet quidem unquam quae debeant aliquando probari.'

ing a work and then abandoning it may suggest the amateur painter who is cultivating his art rather than attempting to earn a living. Or it may refer to the erasable tablets (*tavolette, tavole*) which Cennini describes as being used at the earliest stage of training.¹⁶ In normal studio practice more advanced pupils would normally have helped the master painter with backgrounds or less important figures. Their mistakes would be corrected or replaced by the master painter. But studio practice may not be to the point here, for the goal Agricola envisages is not payment but praise. In order to develop as a painter, the student will have to get his hands dirty and produce bad work. Perhaps the message Agricola is developing through his comparison fits the writing-school better than the studio. In the same way, he continues, the musician's understanding of harmony and intervals will not help him unless 'careful practice (*meditatio*) makes everything familiar, strengthens it, instils it and turns it into second nature':¹⁷

In the same way in agriculture, in warfare, in governing states and in correctly and appropriately shaping every kind of life, teaching will be pointless (*supervacua*) if it is not followed by hard work (*industria*) on the part of the learner. For whatever we learn for the sake of work, will also be learnt best of all at work. The most effective way of teaching someone to do something correctly is to let them do it often.¹⁸

Here Agricola uses words like *industria, opus, and facere* to emphasize the role of real work in the acquisition of skills. You train for the sake of a job, but the best training is provided by the job itself. The distinction between *usus* and *exercitatio* is becoming blurred because there is a similarity of function, at least from the educational point of view. Work as well as exercise will make sense (and use) of the precepts. Since even simple arts seem more difficult, obscure and pointless without the help of practice (*usus*), it should not surprise us if the more difficult arts are brought into light by frequent and careful handling of things (*creber et diligens rerum tractatus*):

For this reason we have said everything at greater length than writers of dialectic manuals usually do. Here we have not merely filled out the book with examples, but also weighted it down with them, so that we could set everything out as plainly and conspicuously as we could. However I would insist that these same things of whatever kind, and even better things if you like, will not be of great benefit unless practice results from art, and words are translated into deeds (*nisi de arte fiat usus, et in opus verba vertantur*).¹⁹

¹⁶ Cennini 1982: ch. 5-7; Van de Wetering 1991: 210-227. I am most grateful to Truus van Bueren for this reference.

¹⁷ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452 [= ed. 1992: 554]: 'si non omnia diligens meditatio assuefecerit, firmaverit, indiderit, et prope in naturam verterit.'

¹⁸ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452 [= ed. 1992: 554]: 'Hoc in rebus rusticis, hoc in bellis gerendis, in republica administranda, in uniuscuiusque vita rite recteque formanda evenit, ut supervacua sit praeceptio quam non fuerit industria discentis sequuta. Quaecunque enim discuntur operis gratia, praecipue discuntur etiam ex opere. Nec ulla res efficacius recte nos docet facere, quam ut saepe faciamus.'

¹⁹ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452 [= ed. 1992: 556]: 'Quam ob causam nos etiam omnia fusius diximus quam solent qui ista praecipunt. Exemplis deinde omnia non implevimus modo, sed oneravimus etiam, ut quocunque possemus modo, cuncta quantum in nobis erat, velut in plano conspicuoque poneremus. Et haec ipsa tamen qualiacunque et his quantumvis meliora, contenderim non magnopere profutura, nisi de arte fiat usus, et in opus verba vertantur.'

Agricola here justifies the length of his book on the ground that careful handling (*tractatus*) of the material will make it more accessible. It is significant that he uses the same word *tractatus* to describe the last third of book two in which he proposes techniques for getting acquainted with the topics and learning how to use them.²⁰ *Tractatus* can mean actual use as well as exercise. In his peroration Agricola makes the same point. He writes at such length to make things easier for those who are trying to learn.²¹ In the passage before us, the length of the work is linked to the extensive provision of examples, which is linked in turn to the need for practice (*usus*) and work (*opus*) on the part of the learner. The examples are the bridge between the precepts and practice. They clarify the instruction and they show how the rules affect (and are affected by) actual use. Then he explains what he means by *usus*:

In this context I take *usus* in two senses: reading authors of each kind, and then shaping ourselves to their example as far as possible. The first of these is more suitable for understanding the art, the latter is better at nurturing the ability to perform.²²

Reading and imitation are school exercises (which other authors would normally classify as *exercitatio*), but they are also practices of adult life. Agricola's use of *usus* here breaks down the distinction between the two kinds of practice. Typically, he goes on to explain how and why all types of author are to be read, and to describe a sequence of types of imitation.²³ If he is to help his readers it will not be sufficient to assert the importance of imitation but he must also explain how it is to be organised. Equally typically he concludes with a summary which focusses on firm knowledge of the topics and training the mind with much practice (*usus*).²⁴

Agricola employs a range of practice words in this chapter (*tractatus*, *consuetudo*, *meditatio*, *actio*, *exercitatio*, *industria*, *opus*) but *exercitatio* is used relatively infrequently. The focus is rather on work words and particularly on *usus*. In one of the later quotations *usus* is said to mean reading and imitation; two senses which earlier rhetoricians would normally have to give to *exercitatio*. It is possible, of course, that Agricola regarded *usus* and *exercitatio* as virtual synonyms; though if this were the case one might expect him to use *exercitatio* more frequently. The alternative, which I prefer, is that Agricola regarded reading and literary imitation not as a preparation for court life or the civil service, but as work, as a distinct way of life. This leads us on to a larger question: who was Agricola hoping to train? What was his ideal of life?

For most humanist pedagogues the answer was simple but double: they were

²⁰ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 190, 353 [= ed. 1992: 206, 386].

²¹ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 455 [= ed. 1992: 562].

²² *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452-453 [= ed. 1992: 556]: 'Usum duabus his in rebus fore accipio: scriptis autorum cuiusque generis expendendis, et nostris deinde ad illorum exemplum quantum datur effingendis. Quorum illud est ad artis praeceptionem commodius, istud ad efficiendi facultatem efficacius.'

²³ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 453-454 [= ed. 1992: 556-558].

²⁴ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 454-455 [= ed. 1992: 560].

training princes, courtiers and orators — that is — although they were teaching classical literature and the Latin language, their students would be men of action in the real world — ‘orator est velut rector et dux populi’ as Valla famously said in his *Dialectic*.²⁵ In the preface to that work Valla asked why Aristotle should be the subject of such hero worship since he had performed none of the works which mark out distinguished men. He had not won battles, passed legislation, ruled provinces but merely composed or compiled more works than other men.²⁶ But before I ask Valla which battles he won and which provinces he governed, I should notice the beam in my own eye. I teach literature and criticism, but I hope that my students will become accountants, politicians, nurses or cricketers.

But Agricola may have been different. To start with he did not want to teach publicly. He refused a chair at Louvain, and a well paid job in Antwerp. He considered teaching an illiberal occupation.²⁷ Beyond that, of course, and unlike Valla, he was a public figure, both as an intellectual hero, and as *secretarius* of Groningen, a job he hated, not for geographical reasons. Agricola’s ideal of life was study, sharing his reading of ancient literature with the small groups of northern students which formed around him in Pavia and Ferrara, and writing works of his own to add to what he had received from antiquity.²⁸ Much of Agricola’s social and personal life centred on study. When he visited a new place, he first sought out libraries and manuscripts. If you wrote Agricola a letter, in Latin naturally, you could expect it to be returned with corrections of grammar, diction and style.²⁹ For him this was a perfectly ordinary, indeed a charitable way to behave. Agricola was unsure what the audience of *De inventione dialectica* would be — it was too advanced for those without a good grasp of Latin literature, and too basic for the learned³⁰ — but I want to suggest that he wrote it for scholars and writers, for people for whom reading and writing were practice, *usus* as well as *exercitatio*.

In its usual ironic fashion, history was about to provide him with another audience he could not have dreamt of, the body of preaching clergy, which northern humanists and reformers alike saw as the goal of education, and the hope of Christian Europe.

I have another conclusion to draw from book III, chapter 16 which is more mundane and less questionable. Agricola’s final, supplementary chapter points out to us how much the structure and whole content of his book is dictated by considerations of *usus*. Agricola himself points to the practical importance of his examples.³¹ These take two forms: worked examples — in which Agricola

²⁵ *Repastinatio dialecticae et philosophiae* 1982: 176.

²⁶ *Repastinatio dialecticae et philosophiae* 1982: 5-6.

²⁷ Hartfelder 1886: 28; De Vocht 1951: 151, 161-163; *Lucubrationes* 1967: 208-214.

²⁸ Mack, *Renaissance Argument* 1993: 120; *Lucubrationes* 1967: 198.

²⁹ Morneweg 1887: 51; *Lucubrationes* 1967: 189-191.

³⁰ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: fol. b1v [= ed. 1992: 4].

³¹ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452 [= ed. 1992: 556]: ‘Exemplis deinde omnia non implevimus modo, sed oneravimus etiam, ut quocunque possemus modo, cuncta quantum in nobis erat, veluti in plano conspicuoque poneremus.’

shows, how to make a definition or how to arrive at the key question for debate, and literary examples, in which he analyses passages from Virgil or Cicero to show how they exemplify or modify the precepts he is passing on.³² Worked examples link the precepts with his own methods of working and the practice (*exercitatio*) of his students; literary examples show how the practice (*usus*) of the best authors reflects and enriches the principles. In both cases the examples are a bridge, reinforcing, clarifying and improving the theory. Beyond this Agricola takes various measures to make his theory more usable: among them the step-by-step methods, showing exactly how to do dialectical reading or dialectical invention,³³ the *summaries*, in which the various techniques described are fitted together,³⁴ and the discussions of the use of particular topics or forms of argumentation.³⁵ Beyond that the whole plan of the book is intended to give a unified account of invention, drawn from the precepts of rhetoric and dialectic. *De inventione dialectica* is written to be completed by practice, *de arte fiat usus*.³⁶ The considerable amount, both in organisation and content that it adds to the traditional syllabus of rhetoric and dialectic largely derives from practice in both senses.

But what of Agricola's own practice as a writer. On Christmas Day 1484 Agricola delivered his *Oration on Christ's Nativity* to the assembled clergy of the diocese of Worms.³⁷ The situation must have been quite awkward. Agricola was a famous man, a friend of their young newly appointed bishop, Johann von Dalberg, but he was a layman, effectively preaching to a group of clergy on one of the busiest and most important Church feasts of the year. It was the second time in a few months that they had been assembled to hear him. Some of them must have resented the bishop's implication that Agricola could show them a better way to preach.

Agricola begins with a comparison which he develops at some length. We are accustomed to celebrate the birthdays of individuals within the family, of princes in public. The birthdays of those who are outstanding in virtue are considered worthy of as much more celebration as it is better to benefit the common safety and life of many than merely to live.³⁸ These comparisons lead into the main question of the oration, which he embellishes with the figure of climax:

What must we do today, then, most learned men? What frame of mind should we be in today? Christ is born to us, what speech is worthy of our praise? What praise of our joy? What joy of such happiness?³⁹

³² Mack, *Renaissance Argument* 1993: 227-243; Mack 1985: 23-41.

³³ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 353-372 [= ed. 1992: 386-424].

³⁴ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 375-377, 449-450 [= ed. 1992: 424-430, 550-552].

³⁵ For example *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 58, 99, 118-119, 132, 279-282 [= ed. 1992: 66, 112, 134-136, 144, 322-328].

³⁶ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 452 [= ed. 1992: 556].

³⁷ *Lucubrationes* 1967: 118-125.

³⁸ *Lucubrationes* 1967: 118.

³⁹ *Lucubrationes* 1967: 119: 'Nobis autem doctissimi viri quid hodie faciendum est? Quis animus in praesentia sumendus? Natus iterum nobis adest Christus, quae oratio laudi nostrae? Quae laus gaudio? Quod gaudium felicitati tantae sufficiet?'

De inventione dialectica had emphasized the importance of the main question to any process of composition and to any reading. This elaborated question is fairly clearly derived from the kind of questions Agricola recommended for epideictic orations. He explained that in demonstrative oratory the main question must link the audience to the event or person to be praised: is it appropriate that we should be pleased by this event? Ought we to take joy from the marriage of such a happy couple?⁴⁰ In his *Oration* Agricola takes as his main question: how should we express our joy at the Nativity?

His next move is to amplify the question in order to explore the difficulty of expressing such joy:

How shall we speak of the birth of Him, of whom the prophet in wonder said [*Isaiah*, 53, verse 8], 'who shall declare his generation?' He who was not only the greatest of men but who was also God, which is more sublime than all greatness, and who, since he was born and is born from eternity, also arranged that he could be said to be born today. Just as we have to be born through birth in order to live life, so he underwent our mortality so that he could make us conform to the pattern of his immortality, exalting us by despoiling himself, made the son of man in order that he might make us the sons of God. These things are all mighty, extraordinary and above all fortunate and happy to us. Their magnitude cannot be sufficiently venerated, their unexpectedness adequately wondered at. Their fruit and rewards not only surpass all thanks, but cannot even be contained in our memories.

However ancient custom dictates that I must here say a little more about the joy of this day. On this subject nothing can ever be sufficient, and yet at the same time nothing can be insufficient. I say nothing is sufficient because every thought let alone every human utterance falls short of the greatness of this day. On the other hand nothing is insufficient because God, who can draw praises from the mouths of babes and sucklings will find acceptable whatever is said piously and in a pure spirit. Therefore I want to beg that you will receive whatever I say with your customary humanity, which you have often shown me. I ask that you will be merciful to me, as you have been before, and that you will extend that same indulgence, which you have before shown to my slender talent in smaller affairs, in greater measure now that I need it in great matters.⁴¹

In amplifying his subject and setting out the difficulties facing anyone who has to speak of it, Agricola is, in part, making a traditional type of *captatio benevolentiae*. But he is also establishing common ground with his audience before asking their indulgence. Whatever awkwardness he might feel in preaching before an audience of clergy, they and he share the awkwardness which any

⁴⁰ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 244-245 [= ed. 1992: 282].

⁴¹ *Lucubrationes* 1967: 119: 'Natalem agimus eius cuius (ut stupens inquit propheta) generationem quis enarrabit? Qui non modo summus homo sed quod omni summo sublimius etiam est Deus, quique cum ab aeterno natus sit atque nascatur, fecit etiam ut et hodie dici possit esse natus. Cuius et nos ut vita vivimus sic nati sumus nativitate, subiit mortalitatem nostram ut imagini nos immortalitatis suae faceret conformes, exinaniendo seipsum, nos extollens, factusque filius hominis, ut filios nos faceret Dei. Ingentia omnia, inusitata et perinde nobis quoque felicia et fausta, quorumque neque magnitudinem satis venerari, neque novitatem stupere, neque fructum munerae nostrae non modo aequare gratia, sed ne memoria quidem complecti quimus.

Cum sit autem mihi ex prisco more de huius diei laetitia paulo pluribus hoc loco disserendum de qua quicquid disseritur nihil satis est, et nihil non est satis, sic enim sentio ut dico nihil satis est, quod omnis cogitatio, nedum oratio humana, infra illius diei magnitudinem est posita, contra quoque nihil non satis, quod quidquid pio puroque dicitur affectu, ille satis dictum putat, qui ex ore infantium etiam et lactentium perficit laudem. Exoratos ergo vos velim ut hanc qualemcunque dictionem meam solita vestra et saepius experta mihi excipiatis humanitate. Praebebitis vos (oro) mihi ea mansuetudine qua crebro praebuistis, et veniam quam in minoribus nonnunquam rebus dedistis tenuitati ingenii mei, eam nunc immensis in rebus magnitudini ipsi quaeso tribuatis.'

human feels in attempting to describe, and give thanks for, the goodness of God. So he is able to draw on a shared purpose and a shared problem before asking for their understanding. Throughout the oration he returns to this set of issues: the extraordinary power of God; the generosity of God in confining Himself into human weakness; and the impossibility and necessity of an adequate human response. The contrast between divine power and human weakness which underlies the paradox of the incarnation is also made to shed hope on the task of the orator. Their awareness of Christ's willingness to make good human deficiency will encourage them to receive his speech with the humanity which they share.

Agricola's second strategy is to use a Biblical text as the foundation of his speech. While his introduction and his choice of question reflect classical rhetoric, and his own humanist adaptation of it, his commentary on a verse of scripture, which is the other structural feature of his oration, reflects the medieval tradition of the thematic sermon.

His chosen text is from *Psalm* 118, verse 23: 'The Lord has done this and it is wonderful in our eyes'. The text suits his rhetorical purpose because it expresses the wonder of a congregation at God's actions. It is also admirably linked with Christ, who applies it, together with the more famous preceding verse, to himself, in *Matthew* 21, verse 42:

Jesus saith unto them (the pharisees), Did ye never read in the Scriptures, the stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?

The question and the quotation govern the structure of the oration. By applying topical invention to the phrase 'This thing is done by the Lord' (*A domino factum est istud*), Agricola is able to explore God's power and the action of the nativity while continually alluding to the wonder and praise which must be the human response, logically and on the basis of his text. The first focus is on God who alone could have done this. Agricola considers God's power in terms of the magnitude of the creation, and of the skill with which God created. Then, in a comparison from greater, he explains that God's mastery was shown less by the creation than by the incarnation, first explaining the wonder of God making himself weak (contraries), then exploring in detail the significance of the circumstances (time, place, adjuncts) of his birth. The structure is intensely logical and strongly amplified. It culminates in a return to scripture:

What shall we do? Let us follow our leaders the angels, that voice sent from heaven, chanted by the heavenly armies, an augury of great happiness received by the earth. Let us with all our minds, hearts and voices think, repeat, chant, believe those sharers of divine mysteries who have proclaimed this most fortunate event in most happy words. Let us imitate them and, just as in any time, but more especially in these joyful days of His birth, let us say repeating their song once again: Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace to men of good will.⁴²

⁴² *Lucubrationes* 1967: 125: 'Quid faciemus? Angelos sequamur duces, vocem illam de coelo perlatam, ab exercitibus decantatam coelestibus, a terris auspicem summae felicitatis acceptam, illam totis animis, toto pectore, toto voce cogitemus, repetamus, concinamus, credamus illos divinatorum conscios arcanorum, rem felicissimam faustissimis quoque praedicasse verbis, illos imitemur, et cum omni tempore, tum praecipue laetissimis his novi puerperii diebus, carmen illud subinde repetentes dicamus: Gloria in excelsis deo, et in terris pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.'

Agricola's long periodic sentences, his use of climax and contraries are evident in the verbal texture of his oration. So are his broad structural principles which combine structures from classical oratory and medieval sermon-writing. The topical connections which link his arguments do not appear directly in the text since they are part of the process of composition. It is possible to suggest likely topics, as I have above, and as Alardus does in his commentary, but there is no proof.⁴³ Named topics can be found in Agricola's commentary on Cicero's *Pro lege Manilia*, in which he shows how dialectic can be used to analyse a classical text.⁴⁴

It is, of course, a splendid oration — as polished a piece of Latin prose as one could hear anywhere in the 1480s. It deserves a fuller analysis than I have given, but I hope I have said enough to convince you that Agricola carries out his own precepts, and to suggest the quality of the resulting oration. It would be much better known if there were still an audience for Latin oratory. But there is not and even its own time, this oration was a piece of display rather than a deep analysis or a serious plea for change. If anyone is going to make a claim for Agricola's success as a writer it will have to rest primarily on *De inventione dialectica*.

If anyone is going to make a claim — well, I am the person who usually makes the grand claims for Agricola, and I would like to end this paper by outlining the case that *De inventione dialectica* is great writing. I have argued at length elsewhere that Agricola's book is an original synthesis of rhetoric and dialectic which also advances the state of both arts.⁴⁵ Within the genre it is to be ranked with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. But I would also argue that *De inventione dialectica* transcends the genre of rhetoric textbooks — through its moments of perception and illumination. Perhaps I have time for a few examples: most writers on rhetoric and dialectic emphasize definition — as a goal of knowledge and a means of expression. Only Agricola points out that the classic form of the definition is vitiated by the shortage of *differentiae*. As he says, just about the only *differentia* which everyone agrees on is 'rational' in 'man is a rational animal'. And Agricola continues first to notice that some people would dispute even that, and then more practically, to discuss other types of definition and how to formulate them.⁴⁶ Or the moment in his discussion of similitude where he notices that although similitude is not very effective against an opponent, since the similarity may be rejected, still it can operate like an argument in accustoming a mind to think about a problem in a certain way. Once you have been introduced to Quintilian's image of a boy's mind as a thin necked bottle which can only be filled by pouring slowly, it is hard to escape from the way of thinking imposed by that comparison.⁴⁷ Or the

⁴³ *Lucubrations* 1967: 125-37.

⁴⁴ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 461-71 [not in ed. 1992]. Perhaps this is too much an exemplification of his methods to qualify as *usus*.

⁴⁵ Mack, *Renaissance Argument* 1993: 120-125, 244-256; Mack 1993: 273-289.

⁴⁶ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 26-29 [= ed. 1992: 36-44].

⁴⁷ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 142 [= ed. 1992: 152-154]; Mack 1988: 267.

discussion of Lucan's similes in which he experiments with the force of alternative vehicles, or the analysis of the mixture of different causes and purposes in the minds of the people who get a ship built.⁴⁸ These represent the intent and open eyes which Agricola urges his readers to employ while training the mind with much practice (*usu*).⁴⁹ There are also examples of mind-affecting comparisons, as when he depicts the view reconstructing the temporal sequence of painting a picture.⁵⁰

Agricola's own use of comparisons, following on from his analysis of comparison, illustrates the intertwining of theory and practice in the book. For *De inventione dialectica* is in a sense a new kind of writing — a writing about how to write and read, how to write out of reading, which is itself writing written out of reading, but also written out of seeing things in full face and with open eyes. It contributes to a particularly renaissance form of intertextuality. But there is also an attractive reciprocation between theory and practice. The topics offer a tool kit for investigating the world, but the investigations undertaken (even as examples, even as exercises) refine the tools and make them more subtle in their responses. For me this also reflects Agricola's idea of life, a life founded on reading, on models, but also requiring a writing which shares its perceptions and refines its inherited tool kit.

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⁴⁸ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 143-144, 74-85 [= ed. 1992: 154-158, 80-98].

⁴⁹ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 454 [= ed. 1992: 560]: 'si multo usu assuefecerimus animum, intentos semper, et apertos (ut sic dixerim) habere oculos.'

⁵⁰ *De inventione dialectica* 1967: 303 [= ed. 1992: 356-358]; Mack 1992: 176.

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