REPLY TO A CRITIC

Jakob Wisse's review of my book *In Defence of Rhetoric* in this journal (45 (1992), 537-544) was remarkably negative, a carping and nit-picking list of errors and (according to him) omissions. In the twenty-five years since I published my first book I have never had such a destructive review, and for the first time I request the right to reply. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, of course, and I surely do not think my book to be without errors and oversights. (Wisse has noted some; more fair-minded reviewers, such as S. Usher in CR 103 (1989), list others he has missed.) But Wisse's review contains so many gratuitous misrepresentations of my work that I feel I must attempt to correct them, particularly as he thanks A. D. Leeman and H. Pinkster for having commented on "a first draft".—Whether those distinguished scholars endorsed either that or the final version remains an open question.

I shall set out my response as briefly as possible.

(1) Wisse announces that he will restrict himself to my "treatment of the classical period" of rhetoric, which forms perhaps a fifth of the whole book. But in fact he passes over in silence many substantial discussions (see the index for full listings): Plato's *Phaedrus*; Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, to which I give special prominence; Cicero's many rhetorical works; the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*; Quintilian; the later stylistic rhetorics of Demetrius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and above all the outstanding *Peri hupsous* of pseudo-Longinus. I also offer discussions of Isocrates, Tacitus, the *declamationes*, Horace's *Ars poetica*, Hermogenes, and Aelius Aristides. All these discussions are simply ignored by Wisse, even though he purports to concentrate on my treatment of the classical system, claiming it has flaws of omission (!) and distortion.

(2) Wisse (p. 538) claims that I present rhetoric "as one static edifice, instead of something which developed over the centuries.... This entails major distortions ...". But in fact I begin with a brief account of the rise and development of rhetoric, from its traditional founders Corax and Tisias to the Sophists, and the impact of Greek rhetoric in Rome (pp. 6-12); I explicitly refer to "the passage of time" and the changed political conditions as factors in the differences between Cicero's and Quintilian's attitude to rhetoric (p. 42); I discuss Tacitus' *De oratoribus* as marking the decline of rhetoric under the emperors, interpreting Maternus' concluding praise of a peaceful Rome which has no need of political or legal eloquence as a transparent irony (pp. 44-7); I comment on the proliferation of stylistic manuals in the Hellenistic period (pp. 51-2), noting their increasing concern with the artefact of a composition rather than with the triad of speaker, speech, and audience (p. 64); and I discuss both the decline of judicial and deliberative oratory by the first century A.D., and the concomitant flourishing of epideictic (pp. 53-5). No fair-minded reader could gain the impression that I treat rhetoric as a static system which never developed.

(3) Wisse alleges (p. 539), as “another [sic] example of historical distortion”, that I do not evaluate “the ancient discussions of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy... as parts of their own intellectual environment”, but simply take them as “responses to Plato”. But I do deal with that dispute independently of Plato: at the beginning of chapter 2, citing H. M. Hubbell’s account of the attacks by philosophy against rhetoric in the first century B.C. (p. 83); at the opening of the following chapter, tracing the ongoing rivalry between the two disciplines in the second century B.C., in the “second Sophistic” movement, as well as in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, with appropriate reference to secondary literature (p. 148 note). Later in that chapter I quote Cicero’s own record of the quarrel between rhetoric and philosophy in the second century B.C. (pp. 163-4), and I subsequently trace its recurrence from Valla to the present day (pp. 178-213). In all these cases I certainly describe the intellectual environment surrounding the dispute, so that Wisse’s accusation of a “general lack of historical perspective” is another gross misrepresentation.

(4) Wisse (p. 539) tells his readers that “[Vickers] does not live up to his promise of an exposition of ‘rhetoric as a coherent system’ (xi), despite the repeated, justified stress on this coherence (44, 67)”. It is very strange that, while making this criticism, Wisse should conceal the actual organization of my brief “Outline of Classical Rhetoric” (pp. 1-82). I begin with the traditional view of rhetoric as a formulation of persuasive processes used in real life, an art based on nature (pp. 1-3). After a brief history of the importance of speech in Greek society, from Homer to the decisive contacts with Rome (pp. 4-12), I survey the major rhetoric texts from Aristotle to Hermogenes, in some cases in substantial detail (pp. 12-52). Turning to the main processes of rhetoric, I briefly describe (with relevant secondary reading) the three genres of oratory (pp. 53-62); the five stages of composition (pp. 62-7); the parts of a speech (pp. 67-72); the orator’s three duties (the so-called “Affekt-Trias”: pp. 72-80); and the three styles (pp. 80-82). While making passing reference to the figures and tropes, I reserve special treatment of that topic to a later chapter, called “The expressive function of rhetorical figures” (pp. 294-339), where I go back to the classical texts and on to the seventeenth century to make an original argument (as other reviewers have acknowledged) for seeing rhetorical devices as functional, not ornamental. — That Wisse should dismiss my account as incoherent, without even mentioning half of it, exposes him to the charge of dishonesty, if not malice.

(5) Wisse (p. 540) accuses me of having an “aprioristic conception of the texts he is dealing with. [Vickers] calls them all ‘rhetoric-books’, and although he does begin by acknowledging diversity (13-14), this insight soon recedes into the background”. But I have no such “aprioristic” concept of those texts. Having emphasized at some length that “they are very diverse compositions” (p. 13), I saw no need to repeat the point. (An