A RHETORIC OF MOTIVES

by

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The point is worth remembering because the verbal "counterpart" of dialectic, rhetoric, was likewise said to deal with "opinion," though without the systematic attempt to transcend this level.

The competitive and public ingredient in persuasion makes it particularly urgent that the rhetoric work at the level of opinion. Thus, in a situation where an appeal to prejudice might be more effective than an appeal to reason, the rhetorician who would have his cause prevail may need to use such means, regardless of his preferences. Cicero says that one should answer argument with argument and emotional appeal by a stirring of the opposite emotions (goading to hate where the opponent had established good will, and countering compassion by incitement to envy). And Aristotle refers with approval to Gorgias' notion that one should counter an opponent's jest with earnest and his earnest with jest. To persuade under such conditions, truth is at best a secondary device. Hence, rhetoric is properly said to be grounded in opinion. But we think that the relation between "truth" and the kind of opinion with which rhetoric operates is often misunderstood. And the classical texts do not seem to bring out the point we have in mind, namely:

The kind of opinion with which rhetoric deals, in its role of inducement to action, is not opinion *as contrasted with truth*. There is the invitation to look at the matter thus antithetically, once we have put the two terms (opinion and truth) together as a dialectical pair. But actually, many of the "opinions" upon which persuasion relies fall outside the test of truth in the strictly scientific, T-F, yes-or-no sense. Thus, if a given audience has a strong opinion that a certain kind of conduct is admirable, the orator can commend a person by using signs that identify him with such conduct. "Opinion" in this ethical sense clearly falls on the bias across the matter of "truth" in the strictly scientific sense. Of course, a speaker may be true or false in identifying a person by some particular sign of virtuous conduct. You may say that a person so acted when the person did not so act—and if you succeed in making your audience believe you, you could be said to be trafficking in sheer opinion *as contrasted with* the truth. But we are here concerned with motives a step farther back than such mere deception. We are discussing the underlying ethical assumptions on which the entire tactics of persuasion are based. Here the important factor is opinion (opinion in the moral order of *action,* rather than in the "scenic" order

of truth). The rhetorician, as such, need operate only on this principle. If, in the opinion of a given audience, a certain kind of conduct is admirable, then a speaker might persuade the audience by using ideas and images that identify his cause with that kind of conduct.

Identification

"It is not hard," says Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric,* quoting Socrates, "to praise Athenians among Athenians." He has been cataloguing those traits which an audience generally considers the components of virtue. They are justice, courage, self-control, poise or presence (magnificence, *megaloprepeia*), broad-mindedness, liberality, gentleness, prudence and wisdom. And he has been saying: For purposes of praise or blame, the rhetorician will assume that qualities closely resembling any of these qualities are identical with them. For instance, to arouse dislike for a cautious man, one should present him as cold and designing. Or to make a simpleton lovable, play up his good nature. Or speak of quarrelsomeness as frankness, or of arrogance as poise and dignity, or of foolhardiness as courage, and of squandering as generosity. Also, he says, we should consider the audience before whom we are thus passing judgment: for it's hard to praise Athenians when you are talking to Lacedaemonians.

Part of the quotation appears in Book I. It is quoted again, entire, in Book III, where he has been discussing the speaker's appeal to friendship or compassion. And he continues: When winding up a speech in praise of someone, we "must make the hearer believe that he shares in the praise, either personally, or through his family or profession, or somehow." When you are with Athenians, it's easy to praise Athenians, but not when you are with Lacedaemonians.

Here is perhaps the simplest case of persuasion. You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his. Persuasion by flattery is but a special case of persuasion in general. But flattery can safely serve as our paradigm if we systematically widen its meaning, to see behind it the conditions of identification or consubstantiality in general. And you give the "signs" of such consubstantiality by deference to an audience's "opinions." For the orator, following Aristotle and Cicero, will seek to display the appropriate "signs"

of character needed to earn the audience's good will. True, the rhetorician may have to change an audience's opinion in one respect; but he can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience's opinions in other respects. Some of their opinions are needed to support the fulcrum by which he would move other opinions. (Preferably he shares the fixed opinions himself since, "all other things being equal," the identifying of himself with his audience will be more effective if it is genuine.)

The so-called "commonplaces" or "topics" in Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* (and the corresponding *loci communes* in Latin manuals) are a quick survey of "opinion" in this sense. Aristotle reviews the purposes, acts, things, conditions, states of mind, personal characteristics, and the like, which people consider promising or formidable, good or evil, useful or dangerous, admirable or loathsome, and so on. All these opinions or assumptions (perhaps today they would be treated under the head of "attitudes" or "values") are catalogued as available means of persuasion. But the important thing, for our purposes, is to note that such types are derived from the principle of persuasion, in that they are but a survey of the things that people generally consider persuasive, and of methods that have persuasive effects.

Thus, Aristotle lists the kind of opinions you should draw upon if you wanted to recommend a policy or to turn people against it; the kind of motives which in people's opinion lead to just or unjust actions; what personal traits people admire or dislike (opinions the speaker should exploit to present himself favorably and his adversary unfavorably); and what opinions can be used as means for stirring men to rage, friendliness, fear, compassion, shame, indignation, envy, rivalry, charity, and so on. Reasoning based on opinion he calls "enthymemes," which are the rhetorical equivalent of the syllogism. And arguments from example (which is the rhetorical equivalent for induction) are likewise to be framed in accordance with his various lists of opinions. (Incidentally, those who talk of "ethical relativity" must be impressed by the "permanence" of such "places" or topics, when stated at Aristotle's level of generalization. As *ideas,* they all seem no less compelling now than they ever were, though in our society a speaker might often have to individuate them in a different *image* than the Greeks would have chosen, if he would convey a maximum sense of actuality.)

Aristotle also considers another kind of "topic," got by the manipulation of tactical procedures, by following certain rules of thumb for inventing, developing, or transforming an expression, by pun-logic, even by specious and sophistical arguments. The materials of opinion will be embodied in such devices, but their characterization as "topics" is got by abstracting some formal or procedural element as their distinguishing mark. Aristotle here includes such "places" as: ways of turning an adversary's words against himself, and of transforming an argument by opposites ("if war did it, repair it by peace"). Some other terms of this sort are: recalling what an adversary advocated in one situation when recommending a policy for a new situation ("you wanted it then, you should want it now"); using definitions to advantage (Socrates using his previous mention of his *daimonion* as evidence that he was not an atheist); dividing up an assertion ("there were three motives for the offense; two were impossible, not even the accusers have asserted the third"); tendentious selection of results (since a cause may have both good and bad effects, one can play up whichever set favors his position); exaggeration (the accused can weaken the strength of the accusation against him by himself overstating it); the use of signs (arguing that the man is a thief because he is disreputable); and so on. Among these tactics, he calls particular attention to the use of a shift between public and private orders of motivation. In public, one praises the just and the beautiful; but in private one prefers the test of expediency; hence the orator can use whichever of these orders better suits his purposes. Here is the paradigm for the modern rhetorician's shuttling between "idealistic" and "materialistic" motives, as when one imputes "idealistic" motives to one's own faction and "materialistic" motives to the adversary; or the adversary can be accused of "idealistic" motives when they imply ineffectiveness and impracticability.

Though the translation of one's wishes into terms of an audience's opinions would clearly be an instance of identification, this last list of purely formal devices for rhetorical invention takes us farther afield. However, it seems to be a fact that, the more urgent the oratory, the greater the profusion and vitality of the formal devices. So they must be *functional,* and not mere "embellishments." And processes of "identification" would seem to figure here, as follows:

Longinus refers to that kind of elation wherein the audience feels as

though it were not merely receiving, but were itself creatively partici-
pating in the poet's or speaker's assertion. Could we not say that, in
such cases, the audience is exalted by the assertion because it has the
feel of collaborating in the assertion?

At least, we know that many purely formal patterns can readily
awaken an attitude of collaborative expectancy in us. For instance,
imagine a passage built about a set of oppositions *("we* do *this,* but
they on the other hand do *that; we* stay *here,* but *they* go *there; we*
look *up,* but *they* look *down,"* etc.). Once you grasp the trend of the
form, it invites participation regardless of the subject matter. For-
mally, you will find yourself swinging along with the succession of
antitheses, even though you may not agree with the proposition that is
being presented in this form. Or it may even be an opponent's propo-
sition which you resent—yet for the duration of the statement itself you
might "help him out" to the extent of yielding to the formal develop-
ment, surrendering to its symmetry as such. Of course, the more vio-
lent your original resistance to the proposition, the weaker will be your
degree of "surrender" by "collaborating" with the form. But in cases
where a decision is still to be reached, a yielding to the form prepares
for assent to the matter identified with it. Thus, you are drawn to the
form, not in your capacity as a partisan, but because of some "universal"
appeal in it. And this attitude of assent may then be transferred to
the matter which happens to be associated with the form.

Or think thus of another strongly formal device like climax (*gra-
datio*). The editor of Demetrius' *On Style,* in the Loeb edition, cites
this example from *As You Like It,* where even the name of the figure
appears in the figure:

> Your brother and my sister no sooner met but they looked, no
> sooner looked but they loved, no sooner loved but they sighed, no
> sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason, no sooner
> knew the reason but they sought the remedy; and in these *degrees*
> they have made a *pair of stairs* to marriage.

Here the form requires no assent to a moot issue. But recall a *gradatio*
of political import, much in the news during the "Berlin crisis" of
1948: "Who controls Berlin, controls Germany; who controls Ger-
many controls Europe; who controls Europe controls the world." As
a proposition, it may or may not be true. And even if it is true, un-
less people are thoroughly imperialistic, they may not want to control

the world. But regardless of these doubts about it as a proposition, by
the time you arrive at the second of its three stages, you feel how it is
destined to develop—and on the level of purely formal assent you
would collaborate to round out its symmetry by spontaneously willing
its completion and perfection as an utterance. Add, now, the psychosis
of nationalism, and assent on the formal level invites assent to the
proposition as doctrine.

Demetrius also cites an example from Aeschines: "Against yourself
you call; against the laws you call; against the entire democracy you
call." (We have tinkered with the translation somewhat, to bring out
the purely linguistic structure as greatly as possible, including an ele-
ment that Demetrius does not discuss, the *swelling* effect at the third
stage. In the original the three stages comprise six, seven, and ten syl-
lables respectively.) To illustrate the effect, Demetrius gives the same
idea without the cumulative form, thus: "Against yourself and the laws
and the democracy you call." In this version it lacks the three formal
elements he is discussing: repetition of the same word at the beginning
of each clause (epanaphora), sameness of sound at the close of each
clause (homoeoteleuton), and absence of conjunctions (asyndeton).
Hence there is no pronouncedly formal feature to which one might
give assent. (As a noncontroversial instance of cumulative form we
recall a sentence cited approvingly in one of Flaubert's letters: "They
proceeded some on foot, some on horse, some on the backs of ele-
phants." Here the gradation of the visual imagery reënforces the effect
of the syllabic elongation.)

Of the many "tropes" and "figures" discussed in the eighth and ninth
books of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria,* the invitation to purely for-
mal assent (regardless of content) is much greater in some cases than
others. It is not our purpose here to analyze the lot in detail. We
need but say enough to establish the principle, and to indicate why the
expressing of a proposition in one or another of these rhetorical forms
would involve "identification," first by inducing the auditor to partici-
pate in the form, as a "universal" locus of appeal, and next by trying
to include a partisan statement within this same pale of assent.

Other Variants of the Rhetorical Motive

When making his claims for the universality of rhetoric (in the first
book of the *De Oratore*) Cicero begins at a somewhat mythic stage