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A RHETORIC OF MOTIVES

by

KENNETH BURKE

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TO W. C. BLUM

II

TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES OF RHETORIC

Persuasion

"SPEECH designed to persuade" (*dicere ad persuadendum accommodate*): this is the basic definition for rhetoric (and its synonym, "eloquence,") given in Cicero's dialogue *De Oratore*. Crassus, who is spokesman for Cicero himself, cites it as something taken for granted, as the first thing the student of rhetoric is taught. Three hundred years before him, Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* had similarly named "persuasion" as the essence and end of rhetoric, which he defined as "the faculty of discovering the persuasive means available in a given case." Likewise, in a lost treatise, Aristotle's great competitor, Isocrates, called rhetoric "the craftsman of persuasion" (*peithous demiourgos*). Thus, at this level of generalization, even rivals could agree, though as De Quincey has remarked, "persuasion" itself can be differently interpreted.

Somewhat more than a century after Cicero, Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratoria* changed the stress, choosing to define rhetoric as the "science of speaking well" (*bene dicendi scientia*).* But his system is clearly directed towards one particular kind of persuasion: the education of the Roman gentleman. Thus, in a chapter where he cites about two dozen definitions (two-thirds of which refer to "persuasion" as the essence of rhetoric), though he finally chooses a definition of his own which omits reference to persuasion, he has kept the *function* of the term. For he equates the perfect orator with the good man, and says that the good man should be exceptional in both eloquence and moral attributes. Rhetoric, he says, is both "useful" and a "virtue." Hence his notion of "speaking well" implies the moralistically hortatory, not just pragmatic skill at the service of any cause.

Add now the first great Christian rhetoric, the fourth book of St.

* He used the word "science" loosely. This definition is in Book II, Chapter XV. At the beginning of Book III he says he has shown rhetoric to be an "art."

Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (written near the beginning of the fifth century) and you have ample material, in these four great peaks stretched across 750 years, to observe the major principles derivable from the notion of rhetoric as persuasion, as inducement to action, *ad agendum,* in the phrase of Augustine, who elsewhere, in the same book, states that a man is persuaded if

> he likes what you promise, fears what you say is imminent, hates what you censure, embraces what you commend, regrets whatever you built up as regrettable, rejoices at what you say is cause for rejoicing, sympathizes with those whose wretchedness your words bring before his very eyes, shuns those whom you admonish him to shun . . . and in whatever other ways your high eloquence can affect the minds of your hearers, bringing them not merely to know what should be done, but to do what they know should be done.

Yet often we could with more accuracy speak of persuasion "to attitude," rather than persuasion to out-and-out action. Persuasion involves choice, will; it is directed to a man only insofar as he is *free*. This is good to remember, in these days of dictatorship and near-dictatorship. Only insofar as men are potentially free, must the spellbinder seek to persuade them. Insofar as they *must* do something, rhetoric is unnecessary, its work being done by the nature of things, though often these necessities are not of a natural origin, but come from necessities imposed by man-made conditions, as with the kind of *peithananke* (or "compulsion under the guise of persuasion") that sometimes flows from the nature of the "free market."

Insofar as a choice of *action* is restricted, rhetoric seeks rather to have a formative effect upon *attitude* (as a criminal condemned to death might by priestly rhetoric be brought to an attitude of repentance and resignation). Thus, in Cicero and Augustine there is a shift between the words "move" (*movere*) and "bend" (*flectere*) to name the ultimate function of rhetoric. This shift corresponds to a distinction between act and attitude (attitude being an incipient act, a leaning or inclination). Thus the notion of persuasion to *attitude* would permit the application of rhetorical terms to purely *poetic* structures; the study of lyrical devices might be classed under the head of rhetoric, when these devices are considered for their power to induce or communicate states of mind to readers, even though the kinds of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome.

All told, traditionally there is the range of rhetoric from an "Art of Cheating" (as systematically "perfected" by some of the Greek Sophists) to Quintilian's view of rhetoric as a power, art or science that identifies right doing with right speaking. Similarly Isocrates in his *Antidosis* reminds the Athenians that they make annual sacrifices to the Goddess of Persuasion (Peitho), and he refers to speech as the source of most good things. The desire to speak well, he says, makes for great moral improvement. "True, just, and well-ordered discourse is the outward image (*eidolon*) of a good and faithful soul."

Or, since "rhetoric," "oratory," and "eloquence" all come from roots meaning "to speak," you can have the Aristotelian stress upon rhetoric as *sheer words*. In this respect, by his scheme, it is the "counterpart" of dialectic (though "dialectic" itself, in such a usage, is to be distinguished from the modern "dialectic of Nature"). Some theorists may choose to look upon the rhetorician as a very narrow specialist. On the other hand, since one can be "eloquent" about anything and everything, there are Quintilian's grounds for widening the scope of rhetoric to make it the center of an entire educational system. He was here but extending an emphasis strong in Cicero, who equated the ideal orator with the ideal citizen, the man of universal aptitude, sympathies, and experience. And though Aristotle rigorously divided knowledge into compartments whenever possible, his *Art of Rhetoric* includes much that falls under the separate headings of psychology, ethics, politics, poetics, logic, and history. Indeed, according to him, the characteristically rhetorical statement involves "commonplaces" that lie outside any scientific specialty; and in proportion as the rhetorician deals with special subject matter, his proofs move away from the rhetorical and towards the scientific. (For instance, a typical rhetorical "commonplace," in the Aristotelian sense, would be Churchill's slogan, "Too little and too late," which could hardly be said to fall under any special science of quantity or time.)

As for "persuasion" itself: one can imagine including purely logical demonstration as a part of it; or one might distinguish between appeals to reason and appeals to emotion, sentiment, ignorance, prejudice, and the like, reserving the notion of "persuasion" for these less orderly kinds of "proof." (Here again we encroach upon the term "dialectic." Augustine seems to follow the Stoic usage, in treating dialectic as the logical groundwork underlying rhetoric; dialectic would thus treat of the ultimate scenic reality that sets the criteria for rhetorical persuasion.)

The Greek word, *peitho,* comes from the same root as the Latin

word for "faith." Accordingly, Aristotle's term for rhetorical "proof" is the related word, *pistis.* In his vocabulary, it names an *inferior* kind of proof, as compared with scientific demonstration (*apodeixis*). (See *Institutio Oratoria,* Book V, Chapter X.) But it is, ironically, the word which, in Greek ecclesiastical literature, came to designate the *highest* order of Christian knowledge, "faith" or "belief" as contrasted with "reason." While the active form of *peitho* means "to persuade," its middle and passive forms mean "to obey."

But the corresponding Latin word, *suadere,* comes from the same roots as "suavity," "assuage," and "sweet." And following these leads, one may want to narrow the scope of persuasion to such meanings as "ingratiation" and "delight." Thus Augustine often uses the term in this very restricted sense, preferring words like "move" and "bend" (*movere, flectere*) when he has the ultimate purpose of rhetorical utterance in mind. (In Sidney's statement that the end of speech is "the uttering sweetly and properly the conceits of the minde," one can discern the lineaments of "persuasion" behind "sweet utterance" when one appreciates the relation between English "sweet" and Cicero's stress upon the *suavitas* of oratory.)

More often, however, the ability of rhetoric to ingratiate is considered secondary, as a mere device for gaining good will, holding the attention, or deflecting the attention in preparation for more urgent purposes. Since persuasion so often implies the presence or threat of an adversary, there is the "agonistic" or competitive stress. Thus Aristotle, who looks upon rhetoric as a medium that "proves opposites," gives what amounts to a handbook on a manly art of self-defense. He describes the holds and the counter-holds, the blows and the ways of blocking them, for every means of persuasion the corresponding means of dissuasion, for every proof the disproof, for every praise the vituperation that matches it. While *in general* the truer and better cause has the advantage, he observes, no cause can be adequately defended without skill in the tricks of the trade. So he studies these tricks from the purely technical point of view, without reference to any one fixed position such as marks Augustine's analysis of the Christian persuasion. Even as Aristotle is teaching one man how most effectively to make people say "yes," he is teaching an opponent how to make them say just as forceful a "no."

This "agonistic" emphasis is naturally strong in Cicero, much of whose

treatise is written out of his experiences in the Senate and the law courts. It is weaker in Quintilian with his educational emphasis; yet his account of eloquence frequently relies on military and gladiatorial images. (Which reminds us that Cicero's dialogue *De Oratore,* is represented as taking place among several prominent public figures who *have left Rome* for the far suburbs *during the season of the Games.*)

Whatever his polemic zeal in other works, in the *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine is concerned rather with the *cajoling* of an audience than with the routing of opponents. Despite the disrepute into which pagan rhetoric had fallen in Augustine's day, he recognized the persuasiveness implicit in its forms. And though some Christians looked upon rhetoric as by nature pagan, Augustine (himself trained in rhetoric before his conversion) held that every last embellishment should be brought to the service of God, for the glory and power of the new doctrine.

The notion of rhetoric as a means of "proving opposites" again brings us to the relation between rhetoric and dialectic. Perhaps, as a first rough approximate, we might think of the matter thus: Bring several *rhetoricians* together, let their speeches contribute to the maturing of one another by the give and take of question and answer, and you have the *dialectic* of a Platonic dialogue. But ideally the dialogue seeks to attain a higher order of truth, as the speakers, in competing with one another, cooperate towards an end transcending their individual positions. Here is the paradigm of the dialectical process for "reconciling opposites" in a "higher synthesis."

But note that, in the Platonic scheme, such dialectic enterprise starts from *opinion.* The Socratic "midwifery" (maieutic) was thus designed to discover truth, by beginning with opinion and subjecting it to systematic criticism. Also, the process was purely verbal; hence in Aristotle's view it would be an art, not a science, since each science has its own particular extraverbal subject matter. The Socratic method was better suited for such linguistic enterprises as the dialectical search for "ideas" of justice, truth, beauty, and so on, than for the accumulating of knowledge derived from empirical observation and laboratory experiment. Dialectic of this sort was concerned with "ideology" in the primary sense of the term: the study of ideas and of their relation to one another. But above all, note that, in its very search for "truth," it began with "opinion," and thus in a sense was *grounded* in opinion.

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"