

RHETORIC—OLD AND NEW

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## RHETORIC—OLD AND NEW

Kenneth Burke

ON THE assumption that writing and the criticism of writing have an area in common, this statement is offered in the hopes that, though presented from the standpoint of literary criticism, it may be found relevant to the teaching of communication.

Let us, as a conceit, imagine a dialogue between two characters: "Studiosus" and "Neurosis." Studiosus would be somewhat of a misnomer for the first figure, who represents a not very interested member of a freshman class taking a required course in composition; and Neurosis would be his teacher. Studiosus has complained bitterly of the work which the course requires of him, whereupon Neurosis delivers a passionate oration in defense of his subject (naturally without mention of a flitting fantasy he sometimes entertains, according to which he has been granted some *other* cross to bear).

Imagining his apology, we found it falling into three stages, that corresponded roughly to an Inferno, a Purgatorio, and a Paradiso. First would be an account of the abysmal problems that beset the use of language. Next would come a movement of transition, whereby the very sources of lamentation could, if beheld from a different angle, be transformed into the promissory. This would be the purgatorial stage. And, despite the mournfulness of our times, a glorious paradisiac ending seemed feasible, if we did a certain amount of contriving—but let us put

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off for a bit the description of this third stage, while we prepare for it by first giving the broad outlines of the other two.

The first stage would stress the great deceptions of speech. As with Baudelaire's sonnet on "Correspondences," it would note how men wander through "forests of symbols." Man a symbol-using animal. Expatriate on the fog of words through which we stumble, perhaps adding an image (the dog and the waterfall heard enigmatically beyond the mist). Here we would consider the problems of news: the *necessary* inadequacy of the report, even in the case of the *best* reporting; the bungling nature of the medium; the great bureaucratic dinosaurs of news-collecting; the added risks that arise from the *dramatic* aspects of news. (And to get a glimpse of what sinister practices we do accept as the norm, where international relations are concerned, imagine a prize fight reported in the style regularly used for news of international disputes: one fighter's blows would be reported as threats and provocations, while the other's were mentioned in the tonalities proper to long-suffering and calm retaliation regrettably made necessary by the outlandish aggressiveness of the opponent.)

We hoped next to work in a reference to what we like to call the "scene-act" ratio. That is, a situation may be so described that one particular kind of act or attitude is implicit in it (described not falsely, but with "honest selectivity"). For a complex situation may without untruth be so reported that exclusively pug-nacious rather than friendly or meditative attitudes are evoked; or the exact oppo-

site may be as true—a rhetorical function thus lurking beneath the level of the report's "factuality." And when each day's "reality" is "dramatically" put together for us by enterprises that comb the entire world for calamities, conflicts, and dire forebodings, such a documentary replica of the arena confuses us as to the actual *recipe* of motives on which the world is operating. The most critical consideration of all is thus drastically slighted, namely, the *proportions* of the ingredients in a motivational cluster.

Given the conditions of our talk, we should pass over this stage rapidly. But before going into the second or purgatorial stage, I'd like to pause for an aside. I submit that this is the situation, as regards the present state of literary criticism: When aesthetic criticism came in, there was a corresponding demotion of rhetoric. Rhetoric was exiled. And, emigrating, it received a home among various so-called "new sciences." (Anthropology, social psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, semantics, and the like all took over portions of it. I would also include here psychosomatic medicine, concerned as it is with ways in which our very physiques are led to take on attitudes in keeping with the rhetorical or persuasive aspects of ideas—attitudes of such conviction that they are worked into the very set of nerves, muscles, and organs.)

I shall cite one example of the way in which the "new sciences" took over: Anthropology now considers, under the heading of "magic," many symbolic devices for the establishing of social cohesion. Under the earlier dispensation, these would have been considered as aspects of *rhetoric*. But here is the paradox: After these topics were exiled and renamed "magic," literary critics who borrowed the new terms were accused by purists of importing alien perspectives into their special discipline. Accordingly, by a "new" rhetoric, we mean one designed to restore structures maimed by the vandalism of the exclusively aesthetic

(an aesthetic stress, by the way, that had also made positive gains, though they are not our concern at the moment).

If I had to sum up in one word the difference between the "old" rhetoric and a "new" (a rhetoric reinvigorated by fresh insights which the "new sciences" contributed to the subject), I would reduce it to this: The key term for the old rhetoric was "persuasion" and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the "new" rhetoric would be "identification," which can include a partially "unconscious" factor in appeal. "Identification" at its simplest is also a deliberate device, as when the politician seeks to identify himself with his audience. In this respect, its equivalents are plentiful in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. But identification can also be an end, as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other. Here they are not necessarily being acted upon by a conscious external agent, but may be acting upon themselves to this end. In such identification there is a partially dreamlike, idealistic motive, somewhat compensatory to real differences or divisions, which the rhetoric of identification would transcend.

But we are now ready for our second stage. For, if identification includes the realm of transcendence, it has, by the same token, brought us into the realm of transformation, or dialectic. A rhetorician, I take it, is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can lead to views transcending the limitations of each. At which point, to signalize his change of heart, poor Neurosis might now be renamed "Socraticus."

Socraticus could point out how the very lostness of men in their symbolic quandaries has led to the invention of miraculously ingenious symbolic structures—whereat the very aspects of language we might otherwise fear can become engrossing objects of study and

appreciation; and works once designed to play upon an audience's passions, to "move" them rhetorically toward practical decisions beyond the work, can now be enjoyed for their ability to move us in the purely poetic sense, as when, hearing a lyric or seeing a sunrise, we might say, "How moving!" (We here touch upon the kind of heightened or elevated diction discussed in Longinus' *On the Sublime*.)

Considering the relation between rhetoric and dialectic, we come with Socraticus upon the Platonic concern with the Upward Way (linguistic devices whereby we may move from a world of disparate particulars to a principle of one-ness, an "ascent" got, as the semanticists might say, by a movement toward progressively "higher levels of generalization"). Whereat there could be a descent, a Downward Way, back into the world of particulars, all of which would now be "identified" with the genius of the unitary principle discovered en route. (All would be thus made consubstantial by participation in a common essence, as with objects bathed in the light of the one sun, that shines down upon them as from the apex of a pyramid. And the absence of such dialectic journeys on the grand scale should not be allowed to conceal from us the fact that we are continually encountering fragmentary variants of them. For instance, you may look upon a world of disparate human beings; you can next "rise to a higher level of generalization" by arriving at some such abstraction as "economic man"; and, finally, you can look upon these unique human beings simply in terms of this one attribute, thus "identifying" them with a unitary term got by a tiny rise toward generalization and a descent again from it.)

But the mention of the pyramid can lead us nicely into the third state, our Paradiso. Socraticus might now even change his name to "Hierarchicus"—and we might dwell upon the double nature of hierarchy. Thus there is the purely verbal ascent, with corresponding re-

sources of identification (our notion being that a rhetorical structure is most persuasive when it possesses full dialectical symmetry—or, otherwise put, dialectical symmetry is at once the perfecting and transcending of rhetoric). But there is also another line of ascent; and this involves the relation between the dialectics of identification and hierarchic structure in the social, or sociological, sense (society conceived as, roughly, a ladder, or pyramid, of interrelated roles).

Here we would consider how matters of prestige (in the old style, "wonder," or in the terminology of Corneille, "admiration") figure in the ultimate resources of "identification." Here we would note how our ideas of "beauty," and even "nature," are "fabulous," concealing within themselves a social pageantry. Here would be the ultimate step in the discussion of the ways in which man walks among "forests of symbols."

Then, for the localizing of our thesis, we might have Neurosis-Socraticus-Hierarchicus cite Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* as a neat instance of the merger of the two dialectical series: the verbal and the social pyramids. For it deals with questions of courtly ascent, while rising through four successive stages from the mere quest of personal advancement, to a concern with the insignia of the courtier as expert or specialist, thence to the cult of courtly sexual relations, and on to the vision of an *ultimate* courtship. In this fourth stage we move into a sacrificial order of motives, fittingly introduced in the dialogues by talk of death, so that, in contrast with the earlier analysis of laughter, there is now a solemn note. This fourth section deals, first, with the Socratic erotic, the love of truth, beauty, goodness, as seen in terms of the courtier who is now in a pedagogic role, aiming not at his own advantage but at the education of the prince in ways that will be beneficial to mankind as a whole.

After the pages on the courtier as educator of the prince, you will recall, through appropriate transitions the work

risers to its exhilarating close, the oration by Cardinal Bembo, on Beauty as “an influence of the heavenly bountifulness.” Here is, to perfection, the device of *spiritualization*. So, by the time the Cardinal is finished, we have gone from the *image* of beauty to the pure *idea* of beauty—we have united with ideal beauty: the courtly, truth, utility, goodness—finally we arrive at talk of the soul, which is given “to the beholding of its own substance,” a substance angelic (the soul kindled by the desire to partake of the heavenly nature), whereat, with images of mounting and burning and coupling, we end on a prayer to “the father of true pleasures, of grace, peace, lowliness, and goodwill,” and on talk of hopes to “smell those spiritual savors”—and lo! after the Cardinal has paused, “ravished and beside himself,” we discover that the discussion has continued until dawn, so that the company, edified,

saw already in the East a fair morning like unto the color of roses, and all stars voided, saving only the sweet Governess of Heaven, Venus which keepeth the bounds of night and day, from which appeared to blow a sweet blast, that filling the air with a biting cold, began to quicken the tunable notes of the pretty birds, among the hushing woods of the hills.

Since this work is so exalted in its closing pages, like the final rejoicing of a symphonic finale, we thought we should contrive to end our apology on that. For it would be something that even *Studiosus* might readily applaud; and in applauding the citation, he might seem to be applauding the speaker.

But at that stage, we grew uneasy. Even suppose our ruse had succeeded. What of the morrow? What had we considered, as regards particular, practical problems?

To meet that question, we should go back to a hint introduced, in passing, when we mentioned the earlier stages of Castiglione’s book. For there the author considers at great length the approved devices whereby the courtier can trans-

late his aptitudes into schemes, stratagems, advantage-seeking actions. Can we not, when looking at the resources of words, seek to categorize and describe in that spirit the kinds of role which, while they impinge upon the rhetorical devices considered in Books vii, viii, and ix of Quintilian, have also a more personalized dimension? These would fall across all the three levels we have considered in our little *Human Comedy*.

Aristotle treated rhetoric as purely verbal. But there are also areas of overlap (making for a kind of “administrative” rhetoric). Consider, for instance, Machiavelli’s *Prince*, as seen in this light:

Machiavelli’s *The Prince* can be treated as a rhetoric insofar as it deals with the *producing of effects upon an audience*. Sometimes the prince’s subjects are his audience, sometimes the rulers or inhabitants of foreign states are the audience, sometimes particular factions within the State. If you have a political public in mind, Machiavelli says in effect, here is the sort of thing you must do to move them for your purposes. And he considers such principles of persuasion as these: either treat well or crush; defend weak neighbors and weaken the strong; where you foresee trouble, provoke war; don’t make others powerful; be like the prince who appointed a harsh governor to establish order (after this governor had become an object of public hatred in carrying out the prince’s wishes, the prince got popular acclaim by putting him to death for his cruelties); do necessary evils at one stroke, pay out benefits little by little; sometimes assure the citizens that the evil days will soon be over, at other times goad them to fear the cruelties of the enemy; be sparing of your own and your subjects’ wealth, but be liberal with the wealth of others; be a combination of strength and stealth (lion and fox); *appear* merciful, dependable, humane, devout, upright, but be the opposite in actuality, whenever the circumstances require it; yet always do lip-service to the virtues, since most people judge by appearances; provoke resistance, to make an impression by crushing it; use religion as a pretext for conquest, since it permits of “pious cruelty”; leave “affairs of reproach” to the management of others, but keep those “of grace” in your hands; be the patron of all

talent, proclaim festivals, give spectacles, show deference to local organizations; but always retain the distance of your rank (he could have called this the "mystery" of rule); in order that you may get the advantage of good advice without losing people's respect, give experts permission to speak frankly, but only when asked to speak; have a few intimates who are encouraged to be completely frank, and who are well plied with rewards.<sup>1</sup>

As an instance of more purely literary tactics, we might cite this passage from Demetrius *On Style*:<sup>2</sup>

In fine, it is with language as with a lump of wax, out of which one man will mould a dog, another an ox, another a horse. One will deal with his subject in the way of exposition and asseveration, saying (for example) that "men leave property to their children, but they do not therewith leave the knowledge which will rightly use the legacy." [This he calls the method of Aristippus of Cyrene.] . . . Another will (as Xenophon commonly does) express the same thought in the way of precept, as "men ought to leave not only money to their children, but also the knowledge which will use the money rightly."

What is specifically called the "Socratic" manner . . . would recast the foregoing proposition in an interrogative form, somewhat as follows. "My dear lad, how much property has your father left you? Is it considerable and not easily assessed? It is considerable, Socrates. Well now, has he also left you the knowledge which will use it rightly?"

For some years, in tentative ways, somewhat on the side, I have been trying to decide on terms for categorizing various literary strategies, as seen in the light of these borrowings from Machiavelli and Demetrius. This is no place to display the lot. But I might cite a few brief illustrations. Here, for instance, are some cullings from my notes on what I tentatively call the "bland strategy":

At one point in *The Idiot*, Ippolit accuses Mishkin of learning how to "make use of his illness." Mishkin, he says, has managed

<sup>1</sup> See the author's *Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1949), p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> v. 296-97, Loeb ed., trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 481.

to offer friendship and money "in such an ingenious way that now it's impossible to accept under any circumstances." Mishkin's behavior has been "either too innocent or too clever." Ippolit is here in effect giving the formula for blandness. Blandness is ironic, in that the underlying meaning is the opposite of the one that shows on its face, while there is always the invitation to assume that the surface meaning is the true one.

Diplomats often use it, when sending warships abroad in times of peace. Though the warships may be dispatched purely for purposes of threat, the enterprise can be blandly put forward as a "goodwill mission." Or a government may use troop movements as a threat, and blandly call attention to the troop movements by announcing that they are but part of a "routine action" and are not intended as a threat.

A friend said: "I once had an uncle who was gentle enough, but enjoyed watching fist fights among children. Each Saturday he would get a dollar of his pay changed into pennies; and calling the children of the neighborhood, he would toss the pennies one by one, while explaining unctuously: 'Just scramble for the pennies, and each of you can keep as many as he gets. But no pushing, no shoving, boys, and above all, no fighting.' While thus setting up conditions of the Scramble that almost automatically made for a fight, he could blandly call for peace, confident that war would come before he had tossed a dozen pennies."

Or there was the case of Joseph, who, without funds, had married a rich Josephine. At first, in all simplicity, he paid for his keep by being assiduously attentive. Then slowly over the years, a perverse, and even morbid blandness emerged in his treatment of her, unbeknownst to them both. Joseph began to plague Josephine with his worries for her welfare. He did not let her live a moment without the feel of a doctor's hand on her pulse. He was so attentive that no one could fail to comment on his devotion. And in her unexpressed and inexpressible desire to poison him, she felt so guilty that each day she became more sickly. Here was a situation worthy of the André Gide who wrote *The Immoralist*. Blandness could go no further.

Soon after our occupation of Japan in the last war, Japanese officials exploited a bland-

ness of this sort. They confounded the victors by being painfully meticulous in their desire to co-operate. They never tired of asking for "clarifications" of military orders, so that they might obey to the last letter. They were even "scrupulous" in reporting their own violations and misunderstandings of any order. They were so assiduously anxious to please, that they made the conqueror sick of his own commands. For instead of resisting the regulations, they tirelessly brought up bothersome questions supposedly intended to "help put the regulations into effect."

An ironically bland kind of co-operation is said to have taken place during the German invasion of Czecho-Slovakia. The Nazis had been sending spies among the Czechs. These spies would spot anti-Nazi patriots by going to Czech cafes and talking "confidentially" against Hitler. Soon the Czechs learned of the ruse. Hence, next phase: Nazi spy comes to cafe where Czech patriots are gathered. In the role of *agent provocateur*, the spy talks against Hitler. Whereupon the Czechs virtuously pummel him "for saying such things against the Führer."

Given blandness enough, one person might co-operate another off the map.

Such stratagems, instances of which I have been collecting (still using a somewhat experimental terminology of placement, not logically schematized—at least not yet) sometimes apply to a rhetoric of human relations in general; sometimes they are confined to purely literary tactics. Many taken from the press fall halfway between a purely "verbal" and an "administrative" rhetoric. And many taken from books (thus from the realm of literature) at the same time have social relevance generally.

I might cite a few more places where concerns of this sort are observable.

In *The Making of Americans* Gertrude Stein came close to a systematic study of rhetorical devices in personal relations. Toward the end, for instance, when discussing how sensitiveness becomes transformed into suspicion, making a "simple thing" look like a "complicated thing," she writes:

These then I am now describing who are completely for themselves suspicious ones, who have it in them to have emotion in them become suspicious before it is a real emotion of anything for anything about anything in them, these have it completely to be certain that every one is doing feeling seeing the thing that one is feeling doing seeing believing when such a one is not agreeing with them, when such a one is feeling thinking believing doing anything that such a one is doing that thing for a mean or wicked or jealous or stupid or obstinate or cursed or religious reason, it is not a real feeling believing seeing realizing, that this one having suspicion in him is certain.

She then gives the paradigm of an anecdote:

One of such a kind of one once liked very well some one and then that one forgot to give this one five cents that this one had paid for that one and then this one hated that one, had no trust in that one for this one was certain that that one knowing that this one was too sensitive to be asking did not think it necessary to pay that one, he never could believe that any one forgot such a thing. This is an extreme thing of a way of feeling that is common to all of these of them.

The stress here moves rather toward the agent than the act (that is, in our terms, it is idealistic); but underlying it is clearly the concern with social tactics (which, one notes, her style is well adapted for stating in *generalized* form).

In a satiric epigram leveled at Cato the Censor, who had walked out of the theater in righteous indignation, Martial asks rhetorically: "Why did you come to the theater? That you might leave?"

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric* a similar pattern is considered when he notes,<sup>3</sup> as a "topic," that one person may make a present of something to another, in order to cause him pain by depriving him of it. Then Aristotle goes on to show how the device may be given cosmological proportions; he cites from an unknown author: "It is not from benevolence that the deity bestows great blessings upon many, but in order that they may suffer heavier ca-

<sup>3</sup> 2. 23.

lamities"—and whether or not this be a favorite device of the gods, it is certainly a device of a sort that should properly be fitted into a collection of strategies for characterizing the antics of the Human Comedy.

Proust's work is full of such concerns. The kind of closely interwoven relationships he deals with makes for tiny replicas of the stratagems used in the manipulating of mighty empires. Thus Proust notes that the servant Françoise and Aunt Eulalie are related as quarry to hunter, so that "they could never cease from trying to forestall each other's devices." And after describing the nature of their sparing, he concludes:

a middle-aged lady in a small country town, by doing no more than yield wholehearted obedience to her own irresistible eccentricities, and to a spirit of mischief engendered by the utter idleness of her existence, could see, without ever having given a thought to Louis XIV, the most trivial occupations of her daily life, her morning toilet, her luncheon, her afternoon nap, assume, by virtue of their despotic singularity, something of the interest that was to be found in what Saint Simon used to call the "machinery" of life at Versailles; and was able, too, to persuade herself that her silence, a shade of good humour or of arrogance on her features, would provide Françoise with matter for a mental commentary as tense with passion and terror, as did the silence, the good humour or the arrogance of the King when a courtier, or even his greatest nobles, had presented a petition to him, at the turning of an avenue, at Versailles.

Nor was Françoise lacking in ability to wage the same kinds of warfare against underlings who were, in turn, subject to *her* jurisdiction. After referring to Fabre's descriptions of a wasp that paralyzes an insect and deposits its eggs in the victim, Proust continues:

in the same way Françoise had adopted, to minister to her permanent and unfaltering resolution to render the house uninhabitable to any other servant, a series of crafty and pitiless stratagems. Many years later we discovered that, if we had been fed on aspara-

gus day after day, throughout that whole season, it was because the smell of the plants gave the poor kitchen-maid, who had to prepare them, such violent attacks of asthma that she was finally obliged to leave my aunt's service.

We could well cite Mark Twain as a source for a rhetoric of such devices. His concern with ruses, stratagems, with the lore of gamblers, swindlers, and the like, is not so much *moralistic* as *appreciative*. His roving enterprisers are not merely salesmen; they are rogues and spellbinders, preferably given to selling poor stuff grandiloquently.

Typically, Twain quotes this example of spiritualization, from a "now forgotten book," about a "big operator":

He appears to have been a most dexterous as well as consummate villain. When he traveled, his usual disguise was that of an itinerant preacher; and it is said that his discourses were very "soul-moving"—interesting the hearers so much that they forgot to look after their horses, which were carried away by his confederates while he was preaching.

*Deflection* is a particularly important device. In a sense any slight bias or even unintended error in our vocabulary for describing reality serves as a deflection. Since even the most imaginative, intelligent, virtuous, and fortunate of men must err in their attempts to characterize reality, some measure of deflection is natural, inevitable. Deflection is so perennially effective when deliberately used, because it arises so spontaneously. The Freudian notion of "displacement" in dreams indicates how close it is to the roots of natural human evasiveness.

Thus a child, provoked when made to give his brother something that he wanted to keep, began crying bitterly because his brother hadn't said "Thank you." His brother promptly said "Thank you," whereupon the child cried all the louder, "because he didn't say it soon enough."

A variant of deflection is used constantly in jokes, where two infractions are in-

volved, one important, one trivial, and laughter is elicited by shifting the stress to the trivial one when the important one was, of course, the real issue.

A typical kind of spontaneous deflection arises thus: Wherever there is control along with disorder, the control can be blamed for the disorder. But if controls are relaxed and there is disorder, the blame can be laid to the absence of controls. Since both the controls and the relaxed controls are matters of government, it follows that government can be blamed for everything.

There is no time now for us to consider the various formulations we have tentatively used in classifying the devices. But we would like to say a few words on one of these, already mentioned in passing. And it will bring our discussion to a close. This is the device of "spiritualization," or the *nostrum* (which transcends the conflicts of the *mine* and the *thine*, the *meum* and *tuum*, by raising them to resonant terms of *ours*, the *nostrum*). Here is a grand device, central to polemic, which is forever translating back and forth between materialist and idealist terms for motives.

Are things disunited in "body"? Then unite them in "spirit." Would a nation extend its physical dominion? Let it talk of spreading its "ideals." Do you encounter contradictions? Call them "balances." Is an organization in disarray? Talk of its common *purpose*. Are there struggles over means? Celebrate agreement on ends. Sanction the troublously manifest, the incarnate, in terms of the ideally, perfectly invisible and intangible, the divine.

In a society beset by many conflicts of interests and aiming with the help of verbal tactics to transcend those conflicts, the uses of spiritualization as a device are endless. Spiritualization is the device par excellence of the Upward Way—vibrant with the gestures of unification, promise, freedom. And so, ending upon it (by recalling snatches, fragments, of Castiglione's symphonic finale):

... beauty . . . truth . . . utility . . . goodness  
 . . . [all grandly united] . . . spiritual savors  
 . . . in the East a fair morning like unto the  
 color of roses . . . the sweet Governess of  
 Heaven, Venus which keepeth the bounds of  
 night and day . . . the tunable notes of the  
 pretty birds, among the hushing woods of  
 the hills. . . .