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THE
PROSPECT
OF
RHETORIC

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7 / THE NEW RHETORIC

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The conceptions and the importance of rhetoric have varied in the course of time. It has been regarded during certain periods, as the crowning feature of a liberal education; yet Jacob Burckhardt described the interest the ancients showed for rhetoric as a "monstrous aberration"; besides, the teaching of rhetoric has been struck from the programs of both high schools and universities in Europe for over fifty years.

This change is coupled with a change in the conception of the object of rhetoric. If, for most cultured people in Europe, it evokes the idea of "figures of style" with their learned and exotic names, if it is pejoratively associated with such phrases as "glib tongue," "speechifier," with the idea of men on the look out for "artificial ornaments," averse to the simplicity which is good form in today's world, this attitude is by no means new. There are examples of it in the works of moralists and of all those who are interested in "serious matters," such as the Stoics, and particularly Epictetus who declares: "But this faculty of speaking and of ornamenting words, if there is indeed any such peculiar faculty, what else does it do, when there happens to be discourse about a thing, than to ornament the words and arrange them as hairdressers do the hair?"¹

If rhetoric is an ornamental art, it no more deserves to be a central element in the education of every cultured man than the art of the hairdresser. That is the reason why the very word rhetoric is not mentioned either in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or in the French philosophical dictionary by Lalande. This is the outcome of a conception which, in opposition to Aristotle, makes rhetoric a counterpart of poetics and regards it as the art of making beautiful speeches or the art of literary prose. Indeed, for Aristotle, rhetoric does not aim at the production of a literary work. It is not a poetical discipline but a practical technique with a view to producing an effect on an audience; if the resulting discourse has artistic value, that is but a consequence, not the aim of the orator's endeavors.

Unfortunately, Aristotle himself encouraged this confusion between the producing of a work and the exercise of an action by his own grossly mistaken conception of epideictic discourse. Whereas he saw without ambiguity that the deliberative and the forensic genres aimed at influencing the decision of the men deliberating in political assemblies and of those who have to pass a legal sentence, he thought that in the epideictic genre the listeners only played the part of spectators and that their decision was concerned merely with the speaker's skill (*Rhetoric* 1358b 1-7).

We know that, in actual fact, during the olympic games, oratorical contests took place on the same lines as athletic competitions and that the best orator received a crown. But it is preposterous to set forth as the character of a genre what is but its literary imitation. Indeed, there is no objection to staging a lawsuit or a political debate, but we would not therefore say that the aim of these oratorical genres is to enhance the author's talent. If such were the case, the speech delivered before the grave of a lost friend, which is the very epitome of epideictic discourse, the latter being, according to Aristotle, about praise or blame (*Rhetoric*, 1358b 12), would have no further object but to prove the speaker's talent! In the same way, the Christian preacher who speaks in praise of humility and repentance would only wish to see his virtuosity admired. There is no more absurd idea, and moralists, from Epictetus to La Bruyère, have never ceased to deride it.

Since the aim of every discourse is in reality to influence an audience, its action can only concern the future: the point is to bring people to act, to decide, to create or to reinforce in them a disposition to act. In that respect, although their end is not to urge people to immediate action, epideictic speeches are nevertheless essential because they increase in us a commitment to the values which make it possible to justify action. Patriotic ceremonies aim at reinforcing in us the love of our fatherland and the virtues of the good citizen. Private ceremonies exalt the virtues of the good father, of the exemplary son, of the devoted mother and of the faithful friend, thus fashioning the model of the man one should be in the various circumstances of life. Political discourse reveals the evils from which the city suffers and calls forth remedies, or presents the image of an ideal city which men should strive to bring into being.

If, as Aristotle points out, we only deliberate over means, a basic and sustained education should have provided us with all the ends which make of man a cultural being, not an animal driven by his instinctive and spontaneous desires. Now, without the epideictic genre, which is the educational genre "par excellence," we would have no rhetorical technique enabling us to create and to reinforce a communion concerning values.

It should be noted that the distinction between oratorical genres, although useful from a pedagogical point of view, should not be taken lit-

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erally. A discourse can aim at reaching various results either simultane-
ously or successively. Thus we know that the communion, on the occasion
of his funeral, around the victim of a political murder, may give the orator
who will sing the praises of the deceased the opportunity to strengthen
the people in their struggle against the Establishment and even to create
a popular commotion, a riot, or start a revolution. These various stages
can be clearly brought to light by an analysis of the famous oration of
Mark Antony in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar."

An old tradition, which is frequently referred to in Plato's writings,
contrasts rhetoric and dialectic, the technique of long speeches on oppo-
site sides and that of questions and answers. At the beginning of his *Rhet-*
oric, Aristotle alludes to these two techniques and makes rhetoric the
counterpart of dialectic (*Rhetoric* 1354a 1). Both techniques have in com-
mon the fact that they can be used for any object, since both aim at per-
suasion by means of dialectical reasoning. However, rhetoric is presented
as essentially dependent on the audience, particularly a nonspecialized
audience. Hence, "commonplaces," that is, the commonsense notions and
ideas, hold a central place in it (*Rhetoric* 1355a 24-28). Dialectic, on the
other hand, puts opposite theses to the test, starting from generally ac-
cepted opinions. This can happen in any field since the examination of
the first principles of any discipline cannot occur in any other manner
(*Topics* 101a 38-101b 4). That is why we are told by Professor McKeon
that dialectic is addressed to a universal audience whereas rhetoric is in-
tended for particular audiences. In reality, however, Aristotle mentions
audiences only in his *Rhetoric*. In the *Topics*, the very idea of an audi-
ence is strangely absent, perhaps because he considers that in a dialogue
the speakers alternately play the part of orator and listener, as in the case
of inward deliberation. That is how, conformably to tradition, rhetoric has
been identified with public discourse even by the very authors who want
modern rhetoric to study the effects of mass media on the public at large.
Professor Becker's attitude is typical in this respect: His interesting study
encompasses the whole range of modern media, yet he begins, tradi-
tionally by identifying "rhetoricians" and "public address scholars."

For Professor Karl Wallace, rhetoric concerns popular, nonspecial-
ized discourse: "The principles and rules of its art refer to, and have rele-
vance for, the subject matter or 'content' of everyday discourse when men
act as social creatures in their families, neighbourhoods, communities, and
political associations, and are not speaking as experts to experts."

It is easy to understand that this view of rhetoric which makes it a
technique for ignoramuses, or at least for nonspecialists easily aroused and
led astray, should have brought it into poor repute. The rhetor would
then be the unqualified man, able by his skillful discourse to throw dust
into the unknowing's eyes, like the demagogue of the *Gorgias* who, be-

cause he has managed to obtain the crew's goodwill by flattery, gets the management of the ship although he knows nothing about the art of pilotage.

However, if we reflect for one moment on the starting point of Aristotle's *Topics*, which consists in generally accepted opinions (*Topics* 100a 30-32), it is obvious that these opinions are accepted by the mind of those to whom the orator addresses his discourse. Hence the topics as well as rhetoric are concerned with dialectical reasoning fashioned with an audience in view. Likewise, when Professor Wallace sees the foundation of rhetoric in the study of good reasons, the main point is to note that good reasons are always relative to an audience which appreciates them as such.²

Aristotle opposed dialectical to analytical or formal proofs establishing truth, falseness, necessity, and impossibility, and determined by rules and criteria which are independent of all reference to an audience. Now, if the dependence on an audience, whatever its composition, is made the distinctive feature of dialectical proofs, the interest of evolving a discipline serving as a counterpart not for dialectic, but for the "Analytics" or formal logic, is at once obvious.

This discipline would unite the topics and rhetoric in one single branch of the study of reasoning with an audience in view. Are we to call it dialectic or rhetoric? I believe there should be no hesitation in calling it rhetoric, for our cultural milieu has for over a century identified dialectic with the conceptions of Hegel and Marx, and rhetoric is the only discipline traditionally concerned with an audience. We shall then call this new discipline the new rhetoric. I will now enlarge on some of its characteristic features which will, I hope, make it clear that it should be a main element in any humanist education.³

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The new rhetoric thus owes its specific character to the relation between speaker and listener, between the man who tries to persuade and those whom he seeks to persuade. Its object of study should therefore be wholly general, not restricted to the techniques designed for a particular audience (for example the nonspecialized public), or to a particular medium of communication (oral or written, direct or indirect) or to any single form of persuasive communication (discourse or treatise, formal or informal discussion, inward deliberation) or to the contents of this communication (political discourse, counsel's speech, philosophical treatise, academic address, report at a scientific congress, etc.).

The very nature of the rhetorical act involves certain common characteristics. Rhetoric has not been given its due philosophical status because it has suffered from a major confusion. Rhetoric in all its generality

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has been identified with the particular cases such as the political discourse addressed to the people's assembly, the counsel's speech or the preacher's sermon, which are samples of the political, forensic, or sacred oratory. Rhetoric should not be reduced to what is generally called the theory of public address or of eloquence, even though these are important applications of the theory.

The rhetorical dimension is unavoidable in every philosophical argument, in every scientific discussion which is not restricted to mere calculation but seeks to justify its elaboration or its application, and in every consideration on the principles of any discipline whatever, even in the programming of a computer. As long as men are not reduced to intellectual robots, as long as their reasoning is not restricted to mere calculation or to the automatic working out of a program, whenever they act on other men by means of a discourse or are acted upon, they are engaged in an activity which is of interest to the rhetorician.

Man thus appears to be an essentially rhetorical animal. Hence, every education aiming at what is specific to man must rest on the two poles of reasoning, the formal, logico-mathematical pole and the rhetorical pole, each being easier to understand when compared or even opposed to the other.

Formal, impersonal thinking unfolds within a system that can be wholly detached from its context. This makes it possible to build calculating machines and various types of computers. But rhetorical thinking presupposes a contact of minds and always occurs in a psychical and social context. In the case of inward deliberation, the speaker and the listener being different parts played by the same person, the social aspect relating to the contact of minds is suppressed. We are, anyhow, left with the linguistic categories, the values and norms, the traditions and beliefs which reflect on the whole the social community in which the person has been educated and exert a continual influence on every one of its members. Freud even points out in his first introductory lecture on psychoanalysis that, when deliberating, a man is apt to hide from himself those motives for his acts which do not tally with the image he wants of himself.

The influence of society may be general, expressing the common-sense of its milieu. But for questions relating to a particular discipline, this influence is the outcome of the methodology of the discipline on which the personal reflection bears. This methodology will be all-pervasive, it may even be exclusive, when the problems under consideration are of a highly specialized nature.

When the audience the speaker addresses is composed of a large number of persons, various institutions exist which either make the contact of minds easy, or sometimes impossible, or which may grant or refuse audience to a speaker, the latter's prestige being thereby either enhanced

or questioned. Such are schools, churches, courts of justice, the press, learned societies, mass-media, advertising, and censorship.

The social aspect of rhetoric makes it easier to understand the attitude of all kinds of protesters and contestants who cannot find in the established order adequate means to obtain a hearing and who seek to attract attention on their grievances by provocative gestures.

Considered from our point of view, political institutions and legal procedures could form the subject of fascinating studies. A list could be made of all the political and religious, public and private ceremonies which periodically offer the opportunity to foster social communion in the exaltation of common values. The rhetorician could thus make use of a great deal of social psychology and of the sociology of persuasive techniques.

The commonplaces of each audience, their variation in time and space, would be an object of study for the sociology of knowledge. The examination of values and their hierarchies, according to the ages, temperaments, social status, and political ideologies could also provide copious information about present and past audiences. Next to empirical inquiries in the most varied spheres, which would be useful to add to the actual practice of rhetoric, a study of the samples of discourse found in history would yield a lot of information about the audiences of the past.

The great speaker knows his audience. He knows the values to which they adhere and to what extent, and the arguments they accept and those they question. We may therefore presume that he is rarely mistaken about these points, especially when we know that his discourse has been effective.

In political discourse, recourse is had to commonplaces, to the common beliefs and interests of the audience. Hence the psychology of the listeners, their beliefs, prejudices and passions play an all-important part. Technical discourse, on the other hand, whether it be judicial or scientific, is composed with regard to the methodology of the related discipline. A knowledge of precedents will inform us as to the reasons which have prevailed in the past and which involve a particular interpretation of the law. The rule of justice which asserts that it is just and reasonable to treat essentially similar situations in the same manner will incline us to hope that, all other things being equal, the same reasons will prevail in the future, that an argument which has proved strongest will remain so in a similar situation.

We also learn from the various methodologies which arguments are regarded as relevant or irrelevant in each particular discipline. Analogy enables us to transpose the use of arguments from one discipline to another.

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thereby gives preponderant value to a certain type of argument while disqualifying certain others. Thus the argument from essence is known as typical of Aristotelianism, while the argument by analogy is characteristic of Neo-Platonism and the pragmatic argument, also called argument by consequences, is presented as the only valid one in Utilitarianism. Criticism of a doctrine is therefore correlative with the reevaluation of the type of arguments despised in this philosophy. I have shown elsewhere how criticism of the pragmatic argument, while setting other types of argument against it, constitutes a criticism of Utilitarianism.⁴

By generalizing, we could thus study the various philosophical systems from the point of view of the type of arguments favored or disqualified. The appeal to reason so typical of philosophical discourse could be analyzed as an appeal to a peculiar type of audience which I have called the universal audience.⁵ The manner in which each philosopher visualizes this ideal audience, to which he assigns a place and a part in his system, could be usefully elucidated thanks to the rhetorical point of view.

The view I uphold, according to which rhetoric constitutes the common structure for all discursive action from one mind on another, would show its special use and even its indispensable character in the methodology of the social sciences, of law and philosophy. We could proceed to develop a common theory and to put it to the test in the field of linguistics and literature and through investigations in psychology, sociology, morals, and politics.⁶

It would also show how this structure must be specifically determined in each particular case, for the principles of rhetoric get more accurately defined through the subject-matter and context. It would reveal the conditions of efficacy for a political discourse or a sermon, for a counsel's speech or a scientific report. In each case the knowledge of the audience and the establishment of a contact with it occur on different bases. Here the oratorical action is essential, there it is negligible; sometimes it is important to know the listener's psychology, in other cases, it plays no part, for only a thorough knowledge of the subject and of its methodology make it possible to convince a specialized audience. At times, the techniques aiming at creating *presence* are all-important; at other times, they will be looked upon with distrust by a specialized audience.

Many such researches would necessitate a close cooperation between rhetoricians and specialists in a particular field, such as literature, psychology, sociology, history, law, morals, political science, history of science and of culture, pedagogy, and philosophy.

Thus, since the Colloquium on Proof which was held in Brussels in 1953, immediately after the IXth International Congress of Philosophy,⁷ researches have been undertaken by the Centre Belge de Recherches de Logique in the field both of law and history. These researches have given

rise to studies of a remarkable value which have established the importance of the Brussels group in legal reasoning.⁸ Two volumes have been published containing studies devoted to the methodology of history and to the historian's reasoning.⁹ Research in that field is proceeding regularly. Literary or pedagogical studies should also be envisaged in common.

Argumentation in all its forms has held a brilliant place with the ancients thanks to the technicians of rhetoric. We hope that the analytical and experimental study of this essential branch of reasoning will be pursued even more efficiently along the lines laid down by the new rhetoric. The latter will now encompass all the aspects of dialectical reasoning which are complementary to those analyzed by contemporary formal logic.

Translated by E. Griffin-Collart

FOOTNOTES

1. Epictetus, "Discourses," Book II, Sec. 23, *Great Books of the Western World*.
2. "The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, XLIX (October 1963), 239-49.
3. Since my first contacts with the members of the Speech Communication Association in 1962, I have found that among the views most akin to mine are those expressed by Prof. W. E. Brockriede in his two articles: "Toward a Contemporary Aristotelian Theory of Rhetoric" and "Dimensions of the Concept of Rhetoric." See *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, LII (1966), 33-40 and LIV (1968), 1-12.
4. Ch. Perelman, "Pragmatic Arguments," in *The Idea of Justice and The Problem of Argument* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), pp. 196-207.
5. Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1969), pp. 6-9.
6. Cf. Ch. Perelman, "Recherches interdisciplinaires sur l'argumentation." Lecture delivered at the Sixth International Congress of Sociology, 1966, and published in *Logique et Analyse* (1968), pp. 502-11.
7. Cf. the readings of this colloquium in the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (1954), No. 27-28.
8. Cf. "Le fait et le droit," Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1961; "Les antinomies en droit," Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1965; "Les lacunes en droit," Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1968.
9. *Raisonnement et démarches de l'historien*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie, 1964; *Les catégories en histoire*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie, 1969.