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WEDGE AND BRIDGE: A NOTE ON RHETORIC AS DISTINCTION
AND AS IDENTIFICATION

Henry Johnstone (1970 p. 124, 1990) has advanced the slogan “Rhetoric is a wedge” to suggest the ways in which rhetoric calls attention to hitherto unnoticed consequences or assumptions, or even to features of the physical world that have escaped an audience’s attention. Here, however, we intend to supplement the notion of rhetoric as “wedge” by suggesting the ways in which it is, and also must be, a “bridge.”¹

Technically, we could say that the two functions of rhetoric here under consideration are distinction and identification. We distinguish ideas that we may have tended to confuse, and distinguish from the background the stimuli we should be attending to. We identify diverse elements of the social landscape, including ourselves, with a cause or project requiring, or at least inviting, solidarity. Some examples shortly. But first it is important to declare that we authors make no attempt to define “rhetoric.” We only appeal to an intuition of what it is that can be the instrument of either distinction or identification. It would not be strange if persuasion had something to do with it.

Let us return to the rhetoric of identification. Since this was not discussed in (1990), we ought to try to say enough about it now.² But we mean to provide only the barest sketch. It is by no means a full study we are attempting here.

Among the performances of the rhetoric of identification, the most pervasive is clearly that which is susceptible to being dismissed as “mere rhetoric.” Speech of this kind ranges from political utterances perceived as radically biased through pep rallies and other partisan gatherings that might be aptly characterized as “bacchanalian.” Through its revelry and indulgence, this rhetoric fixes both the speaker and audience on the particular worth of an action, idea, event, person, etc. in such a way that the possibility of alternative perspectives is never brought to consciousness. Mere rhetoric is therefore not a wedge. But it is not quite a bridge either. The judgment required to discern and associate ideals of virtue is bypassed in mere rhetoric. That which moves the psyche along is more akin to compulsion than judgment. Furthermore, such rhetoric bypasses different perspectives, rather than overcomes them. “To overcome” suggests direct experience with opposition, while “to bypass” connotes indirection, or avoidance of opposition, through such tactics as silence or raising misdirected issues against opposition, what some might call trickery.

Another performance of identification is the rhetoric classed as “epideictic.” While epideictic has certainly been held in suspicion because of its tendency (throughout history) to display oratorical excellence, rather than public excellence, we are not forced to be suspicious. We can for instance envision a less

suspect function of epideictic which would entail seeing the ways in which cultural excellence comes to be identified. Gerard Hauser (1998) has most recently put voice to such a vision by exploring epideictic as didactic, as a teacher of public excellence through the display of public models of virtue. Didactic epideictic provides a common ground of public virtue from which deliberative and forensic argumentation can proceed.

To say that epideictic is didactic suggests it is both a wedge and a bridge. As a wedge, epideictic opens audiences to the ideal of virtuous behavior. As a bridge it connects an audience's consciousness of virtuosity with a model of public virtue. It bridges the self with the virtuous other.

We can look to the common rhetorical techniques (*koina*), in addition to rhetorical genres, for another operation of identification. Take for example, the rhetorical technique which Aristotle calls amplification (*auxesis*), which he describes as generally applicable to all three types of speech but particularly well suited for epideictic (1368a).³ Amplification takes as its subject the undisputed. It draws from a common pool of readily available and agreed upon beliefs, values, and understandings. As Aristotle describes, when a particular consciousness is *in* an audience already, all that remains to be done by the rhetor is to attribute to it greater beauty and importance, in other words to *celebrate* this consciousness (1368a). While this celebration is not a wedge, since it calls attention to nothing the audience did not already believe, it is a bridge. It is an appeal to the identification of "like" consciousness. Only when this identification descends into an ecstasy beyond reason does it degenerate from bridge to bypass, from rhetoric to mere rhetoric.

If amplification operates as a general technique within all three genres of rhetoric, and if it is a way of bridging, then the bridge as a metaphor for identification is applicable to all three genres, not just epideictic but deliberative and forensic address. Rhetoric works as a wedge in deliberative and forensic speech primarily to open an audience's awareness to the existence of a particular problem that needs attending. But the evocation of this awareness is only the beginning of what might be described as a tripartite rhetorical transaction. Beginning with a *problem*, deliberative and forensic rhetoric proceeds through *deliberation* to a *decision*. It is the third term which requires "rhetoric as a wedge" to be supplemented with "rhetoric as a bridge." The wedge alone cannot bring the rhetorical process to its necessary end of judgment.

This is the case whether we are speaking of the more traditional Aristotelian referent of public address, or whether we are speaking of a performance of identification beyond this, such as the reflexive rhetoric which both of us have explored (Johnstone 1970, 1990; Mifsud 1998). Reflexive rhetoric, where rhetorical transactions particularly of a deliberative kind are internalized within one individual, finds an individual torn asunder by the recognition of a particular problem and the alternative ways of solving the problem. If rhetoric only wedges, the sundered self will collapse into schizophrenia. The end of reflexive delibera-

tive rhetoric is to bridge the poles of the divided mind, re-creating a unity of mind manifest in a personal decision.

While we could continue delineating examples of “rhetoric as a bridge,” this is not the task of this note. Rather we hope these examples help to show the need for supplementing the slogan ‘rhetoric as a wedge.’ A properly rhetorical transaction must both wedge and bridge. What begins as an opening of consciousness must end in judgment in order for a rhetorical transaction to reach its *telos*. While one might say that the coming of awareness of a particular problem (as in the case of most deliberative and forensic rhetoric) or a particular ideal of virtue (as in epideictic rhetoric) is a rhetorical moment, it is not the *telos* but the *archê* of the rhetorical transaction. For the transaction to be completed it must move from awareness to judgment. The metaphor of the rhetorical wedge governs the former event while the rhetorical bridge governs the latter. If rhetoric wedges without bridging, no judgment can be realized and the rhetorical transaction is incomplete. And if rhetoric bridges without wedging it becomes bacchanalian in nature. Rhetoric presupposes both the wedge and the bridge—the two cannot be separated rightly.

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Notes

¹In his first advancement of the idea ‘rhetoric as a wedge’, Johnstone also made use of the word ‘bridge.’ Our present use of ‘bridge’ is not precisely the use to which the bridge metaphor was put in the relevant passage of *The Problem of the Self*. But it is too much to ask that metaphors be precise. That is the office of technical terms, the relevant ones of which are now about to be introduced.

²For a noteworthy predecessor to the subject of this note see, Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 38-39.

³Amplification is best understood as a *koinon*, something that is common to all species of rhetoric. It is a technique of persuasion like example and enthymeme. All three techniques are *koina*, but each has its place where it is most at home: amplification in epideictic speeches, example in deliberative speeches, and enthymemes in judicial speeches. See Aristotle’s qualification of amplification as *koinon* at 1403a. For further explanation, see Kennedy (1991), n. 181, 267.

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