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# Oratory

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## Oratory

The crafting of persuasive appeals that finds its conditions of possibility in and has the capacity to exceed the context of its production. Sophistic oratory can be read as both a symptom of and a challenge to the socioeconomic, political, and cultural climate of ancient Greece. Emerging out of a society destabilized by the precarious movement from fragmentation and tyrannical rule toward unification and democracy, sophistic oratory was a force of transformation within the polis. Anticipating the Aristotelian division of rhetoric into forensic, deliberative, and epideictic types, sophistic oratory played an active role in the reclamation of property lost in tyrannical rule, the instruction of proper citizenry and just governance, and the inculcation of values through the praise and blame of prominent figures.

The theoretical underpinnings of sophistic oratory, like its practice, responded to and were shaped by the context of their production. Deriving largely from the Gorgian and Protagorean perspectivist critiques of epistemology (critiques initiated at least in part by the need to consolidate and justify the collective identity of particular city-states), sophistic oratory operated from the premise that all claims to knowledge were equally true but not equally valuable. In the Greek judicial system, for instance, the sophists played key roles as orator-hirelings for the propertied elite. The emphasis on value rather than knowledge in sophistic oratory exacerbated the division of subjects into upper and lower classes in ways that enhanced the power of the elite; thus speech in the courts served largely as an instrument of domination. Sophistic oratory operated unabashedly in the service of *doxa* rather than *epistêmê*, belief and opinion rather than knowledge and truth. On this view all claims to knowledge and truth were submitted to the law of value and subject to the play of political economy.

Responding to the decline of the Greek city-state and the predominance of sophistic perspectivalism, Plato devised a theory of governance and a corresponding conception of oratory that sought to ground the polis in the Absolute rather than the transient. Platonic dialectic, facilitated and conveyed by oratory, was designed to reconstitute Greek politics and culture. In an attempt to fulfill the Parmenidean project, Plato sought to disclose the eternal that gives shape to the temporal, the permanent that unifies the multiplicity and flux of lived expe-

rience. Often drawing attention to the link between oratory and capital, a link that led him to call the fee-taking sophists prostitutes, Plato advanced his own redeemed theory of oratory in the *Phaedrus*. Here the rift between rhetoric and philosophy is sutured by understanding proper oratory as a means of facilitating the process and, ultimately, transporting the Truth of dialectic.

For Isocrates, Plato's near-contemporary, Panhellenism, or the dream of Greek unification, served as an ideal by which particular values were to be questioned, critiqued, and refashioned. Hence, the function of oratory—be it forensic, deliberative, or epideictic—was to conduct “social surgery” on the body politic, to mend the wounds of a society fraught with internal conflict by extending the influence of Athens. The fragmentation of Greek culture at large was to be repaired, then, by orations whose overwhelming purpose was to promote solidarity by way of the inculcation of Greek values and the construction of an “other” or an enemy against which those values could be measured, indeed valorized. In contrast to sophistic oratory, then, the animating impulse of Isocratean rhetoric is not to advance the needs, desires, or demands of specific communities but, instead, to advocate the interests that bind them together. Taking history and cultural memory as the primary resource for rhetorical invention as well as the warrant for political action, Isocratean oratory seeks to transport the past into the present, thereby articulating a telos that circumscribes action. Hence, Isocratean oratory becomes a mechanism of political change and social control.

What distinguishes the treatment of oratory in Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* from that of his predecessors is not merely its comprehensive and systematic character but also its overt refusal to deliberately craft a theory of the art of civic discourse that supports and advances a particular politics. Rather than conceiving oratory as a practice that serves a particular political agenda, Aristotle considers oratory in terms of its pure or generic possibilities. The purpose of the *Rhetoric* appears to have been to lay out a set of general principles of persuasion that would be applicable to any particular situation. But if, on the one hand, the *Rhetoric*'s declared project was to divide oratory into types, temporalities, and *topoi* such that the techniques or strategies might have efficacy in unlimited settings or contexts, on the other hand, the presup-

positions that support and serve as its resource hint at Aristotle's affinity with a form of governance that operates in concert with man's fundamental desire for happiness and the noble life. Indeed, for Aristotle the determining motive of human life and political existence is man's desire for happiness; it is precisely this desire that is the object of persuasive discourse. Hence, whether proofs appeal logically or emotively, syllogistically or enthymematically, at their best they attempt to generate conditions of persuadability that lead to the noble life and, hence, a polis whose governing principle is the common good.

Against the Aristotelian penchant for a generic or universally applicable theory of civic discourse, Ciceronian oratory, in both its theory and its practice, exhibits a renewed commitment to and involvement with the immediate and pressing demands of real-lived political life. Indeed, emerging out of and directing itself to a sociohistorical moment wherein the traditions of republican Rome are virtually in ruins, Cicero's great treatise on rhetoric, *De oratore*, advances a portrait of the active and compelling statesman whose role is to rescue Rome from demagoguery and chaos. Uniting wisdom and eloquence, the arts of thinking and of speaking, the orator integrated theoretical and practical knowledge in an effort to shape the political life of the community.

The movement of the locus of rhetoric from the sociopolitical sphere and into the church gives medieval oratory its distinctive character. Taking as its primary goal the advancement of Christian doctrine, the theorization and practice of oratory issues primarily from the church fathers and preachers rather than from the statesmen and civil servants. To be sure, Augustine's synthesis of Aristotle's theory of words as sensible signs with a Christian notion of the sacrality that provides them with meaning and import in the world, advances a conception of oratory that, in unifying the speculative and dogmatic aspects of rhetoric, functions both as the extrapolation and the transmission of doctrine.

Public sermons that sought to disseminate to a broader public a code of meritorious conduct constituted medieval subjects as individual recipients of the Christian message and as personal agents of virtuous deeds. Although patterned after the informal commentaries on Scripture that typified worship services before Constantine nationalized Christianity, these

sermons were now delivered in church sanctuaries rather than in private households. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a virtual explosion of new preaching manuals, drawing heavily upon the pragmatic and technical approach to persuasion found in Cicero's *De inventione* and in the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, instructed preachers in the use of rhetorical devices and forms appropriate to the invention of thematic sermons that encouraged the practice of virtuous conduct.

New forms of preaching in the Reformation emphasized classical principles of intelligibility, clarity, and figuration that constituted the text of the vernacular Bible as the primary locus of authority, thereby encouraging a private encounter with the Scripture as the basis for religious experience, moral decision, and public life for the common man. Because of this shift in theological focus from the practice of virtue to the experience of faith, many preachers of the Reformation relied heavily on rhetorical devices that produced an emotional response on the part of an audience. Reformation sermonizing challenged the ecclesiastical structures of the Roman Catholic Church by privileging, as Lutheran preaching did, the biblical text over the Christian church as the final authority for truth. The authority of the biblical text became the basis for popular preaching that went much further than Luther and other magisterial reformers like Zwingli and Calvin in challenging the status quo. Preachers like Muntzer and Hut, two radical reformers who abandoned the pulpit to preach to embittered peasants and disillusioned commoners, appealed to the authority of textual interpretation over and against the authority of the institutional interpretation of the church. Significantly, the emergence of printing at this time assisted in extending the influence of Reformation oratory beyond the walls of the sanctuary and the confines of local gatherings. Indeed, it is perhaps the reproduction of Reformation oratory in the new mass media of print that enabled the sermon to reach larger and more diverse audiences than had been possible ever before.

The orators of the American and French revolutions used the logic of Enlightenment philosophy to oppose contemporary political arrangements and to cast themselves as historical agents of the common people. Resting their cases for revolution on first principles apparent in natural law, these revolutionary orators constituted public speech as the means to extract

liberty and freedom from the bonds of monarchy and aristocracy. For example, Colonial orators such as Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, and James Otis took on the *dramatis personae* of soldiers in a battle of ideas with tyrants and oppressors; in courtrooms, public assemblies, and even in churches, these orators opposed personal freedom to British monarchy, an antagonism best exemplified in Patrick Henry's memorable appeal to the Virginia legislature for "liberty or death." In France as in America, the revolution expanded the public sphere, creating audiences for impassioned political oratory in the Republican clubs, the courtrooms, and in the newly formed National Assembly.

Theories of oratory produced in England at this time evidence an Aristotelian revival, albeit with a caveat that is both an effect of and response to the tempestuous character of the age: For George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whately, logic and argumentation are taken to be the primary concerns of rhetoric; however, the limits of reason are brought into the calculation. Thus significant attention is paid to the passions that are understood to transport audiences from conviction to a commitment to action. Additionally, George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* challenges the presumed universal applicability of the topics and commonplaces laid out in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* by boldly asserting that they simply do not engage modern man.

Between the 1820s and 1860s, the period commonly called the Golden Age of Oratory in America, civic discourse was considered integral to conducting the affairs of the new nation, individual speakers were taken to be folk heroes, and audiences expected to be overcome by the power of eloquence. Shuttling between its two opposing aspects, the playful and the rational, oratory was understood as a craft that on the one hand entertained audiences and, on the other, settled political disputes. Inextricably linked with eloquence and at the same time founded upon the principles of good reason, oratory—whether practiced in congress or on the stump—was perceived to be America's alternative to violence in the struggle over the relationship between the powers and limits of individual states and the federal government. More particularly, in the years immediately preceding the Civil War, multifaceted debates over the rights and responsibilities of individual states were distilled into a bipolar struggle over the emancipation of the slaves.

Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" is one celebrated instance of this general trend in American oratorical practice. Similarly, in the post-Civil War period, the dualistic logic that underwrites abolitionist rhetoric is appropriated by the suffragist movement. In both cases oratory shows itself to be a force for social change: the speeches of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, made visible oratory's capacity to help reshape the sociopolitical landscape of a democratic state in crisis.

By the turn of the century, the American public began again, by and large, to be skeptical of orators and the power of their words to shape the course of history. The general perception—not surprisingly, considering the realignment of social relations effected by the transition to industrial capitalism—was that political decisions were made by business tycoons and party bosses and, hence, that public deliberation, debate, and oratory were practiced only to provide the semblance of democratic decision-making. In short, the once-celebrated statesman was looked upon as the mere pawn of the industrial elite and party machines whose platforms and programs were manufactured with an eye to the accumulation of wealth rather than the preservation and accretion of rights. However, rapid changes in the social, economic, and technical domains during the early decades of the twentieth century fostered powerful upheavals in the practice and theory of oratory. The threat of fascism, the hardships of yet another world war, and the devastating realities of a thoroughly depressed economy transformed the public's earlier cynicism toward the power of rhetoric into a widespread and desperate desire for a new kind of public discourse, one that could nourish the human spirit and inspire collective action by speaking to two sensibilities—realist and romantic—at once. It was FDR's fireside chats that both substantively and stylistically forged an allegiance between the two and thus captured the imagination and earned the trust of Americans.

From the early 1940s to the mid 1960s, rhetorical theories emerged to make sense out of the dynamic changes taking place during the postwar era. New forms of mass culture, consumer society, technology and social unrest (for example, the Civil Rights and Women's Movements) obliged a reinterrogation of received conceptions of the constituent elements of the

rhetorical situation. As was the tendency across the human sciences, rhetorical theory was transformed by a hermeneutics of suspicion that demanded a movement beyond the discipline and toward the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. While Kenneth Burke's "Freudoid" theory of identification and his incorporation of Marx into a reconstructed history of rhetoric in *A Rhetoric of Motives* signified an attempt to uncover the (political) unconscious of the time, Richard Weaver's rehabilitation of Platonic idealism for rhetoric, as well as Chaïm Perelman's theory of the universal audience, signified an attempt to disclose the conscious, albeit sometimes implicit, rationality of modern man to himself.

Transformations in the theory of rhetoric at the time were paralleled by dynamic changes in oratorical practice. Despite similarities between movement goals and media strategies, the discourse of the Women's Movement was substantively and stylistically unlike that of the Civil Rights Movement, its unique character the manifestation of a decidedly different understanding of the role of leadership, constitution of audience, and purpose of public discourse. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement (in which there was some controversy about who should lead but relatively little difference of opinion about whether there should be leadership at all), the Women's Movement was at least conceptually committed to egalitarianism. Hence, since leaders imply followers, a hierarchically organized and orchestrated revolution would violently contradict the overarching goal of the movement: equality among all persons. Additionally, whereas the Civil Rights Movement presumed an already existing black community (in churches, neighborhoods, and schools), the Women's Movement recognized the need to articulate an audience, one whose internal differences (race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, geography, religion) could be sublated into a common cause and collective identity. Finally, rather than rely primarily on speeches by great orators in churches and other public spaces in order to move people to act (as was the case for the Civil Rights Movement), the Women's Movement developed a "bottom up" approach to persuasion that anchored itself firmly within "personal" experience.

On the whole, modernist rhetoric and rhetorical theory sought to pose a resolution to the social contradictions and inequities that riddled collective life during the 1940s, 1950s, and

early 1960s by looking to an underlying structure or deep logic out of which a coherent liberatory politics might ensue. It was, however, the very persistence of a radical disjunction between the emancipatory promise of Enlightenment rationality and its material instantiation out of which postmodernist rhetorical theories and rhetorics emerged. Lyotard, Habermas, and Derrida, for instance, revisit Auschwitz so as to determine the absolute limit of rational disputation (Lyotard), to make visible the complicity between pure reason and apocalyptic projections (Derrida), and to retrieve rationality from the abuses of *Ursprungsphilosophie* (Habermas). Similarly, the work of the New French Feminists targets Enlightenment rationality as a crucial site of contestation, seeking to supplement a revised conception of reason with a thoroughly libidinalized theory of desire.

No doubt, the critique of Enlightenment rationality was to a great extent spurred on by the radically altered configuration of culture. As if in response to a shift from a generalized sense of alienation to a pervasive feeling of fragmentation, postmodern oratorical practices overwhelmingly exploit fragmentation as the rhetorical means through which decidedly heterogeneous publics can be moved to act in concert, albeit for quite disparate reasons.

The fragmentation that is “the structure of feeling” (Williams) as well as the “cultural dominant” (Jameson) of postmodernity has altered both rhetorical theory and criticism by, amongst other things, decentering the object inquiry. Not only has it become necessary to pay attention to discursive practices that are not verbal but visual (a theoretical-practical shift in the field inaugurated by the Kennedy and Nixon presidential debates); more important, at a time when politics has become the pulpit of industry, the appeal of the fragmentary—understood as a spectacle or simulacra—must be accounted for by refusing to read discursive practices as simply representational or constitutive.

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## The Other

The name recently given to the internal (sexual) differential that is the condition of possibility for rhetorical acts. The question of the relation of self and other is the inaugurating question of Western philosophy and rhetoric. From Parmenides’ inquiry into the problematics of the one and the many regarding the unity of Being, through G.W.F. Hegel’s formulation of self-consciousness and identity, and to the litany of thinkers working within and against the dialectical tradition, the history of the thinking on the relation of self and other registers the movement from being (ontology) through knowing (epistemology), through doing (ethics) and, finally, to acting (rhetoric).

Traditionally, rhetorical theorists have understood the problematic of self and other as that which merely structures the relationship between speaker and audience. However, Jacques Derrida, arguably the most influential post-Hegelian philosopher, obliges the recognition that alterity resides within rather than simply obtains between those two constituent elements of the rhetorical situation. Taking up the question of acting and rhetoric but working outside the Hegelian morphology, his work invites rhetorical theorists and critics to think the relationship between self and other not in terms of a relationship between interiority and