

PERSUASION WITHOUT WORDS IN TWO RENAISSANCE DEBATES

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A debate or dispute represents a situation which involves more than one party, a topic and a definite (most of the time) code that supposedly ought to make possible the actual "happening" of an exchange of utterances. In Lyotard's terminology, the parties would take the roles of addressor and addressee, interchanging them according to the development of the debate. The topic shapes itself under the idea of referent, it being possible to find different referents in the articulation of one of the parties' view on the topic. The way in which these utterances come to be exerts an unavoidable influence; the type of code can greatly condition the interaction among the elements rendering the actual meaning of the overall debate different from that which was primarily intended. Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* and Rabelais' *La Vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* are two Renaissance texts in prose which contain debates compliant with rhetorical norms but defiant of meaning.

In a rhetorical address, debate or single speech, one of the aspects which contributes to persuasion is delivery. The importance of the delivery was already pointed out by Quintilian (Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.2):

Habet autem res ipsa miram quandam in orationibus vim ac potestatem; neque enim tam refert, qualia sint, quae intra nosmet ipsos composuimus, quam quo modo efferantur;

But the thing [delivery] itself has a extraordinarily powerful effect in oratory. For the nature of the speech that we have composed within our minds is not so important as the manner in which we produce it,

Along those lines, the author of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* points out (*Rhet. Her.* 3.11.19):

Pronuntiationem multi maxime utilem oratori dixerunt esse et ad persuadendum plurimum valere. [...] egregie magnam esse utilitatem in pronuntiatione audacter confirmaverimus.

Many have said that the faculty of greatest use to the speaker and the most valuable for persuasion is Delivery. [...] an exceptionally great usefulness resides in the delivery I should boldly affirm.

The physical appearance of the speaker is a central concern (Cic. de *Orat.* 2.43.184):

Genere enim quodam sententiarum et genere verborum, adhibita etiam actione leni facilitatemque significante efficitur, ut probi, ut bene morati, ut boni viri esse videantur.

For by means of particular types of thought and diction, and the employment besides of a delivery that is unruffled and eloquent of good-nature, the speakers are made to appear upright, well-bred and virtuous men.

In *The Unfortunate Traveller*, there is an "oration" whose addressor is a "bursten-belly orator called Vanderhulk". The orator was "picked out" from an audience of "hot-livered drunkards" (Nashe, 1987: 241). Vanderhulk, our orator, with his "sulphurous big swollen face" (Nashe, 1987: 241) is about to address the Duke of Saxony. The kind of expectations that Nashe is building up for us makes the reader go into the oration already with a sense of caricature.

The Duke as addressee laughs, but the rest of the people approve of the speech of somebody who conveys the only referent that they thought worth speaking about: "The scholastical squitter-books clout you up canopies and footcloths of verses. We that are good fellows, and live as merry as a cup and can, will not verse you as they do, but must do as we can, and entertain you if it be but with a plain empty can. He hath learning enough that hath learned to drink to his first man" (Nashe, 1987: 242). Jack Wilton, the narrator and voice of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, remarks on how "The next day they had solemn disputations" (Nashe, 1987: 244). For Jack, who quotes Vanderhulk's speech completely, the solemnity of the disputations only represented "A mass of words I wot well they heaped up against the mass and the Pope, but further particulars of their disputations I remember not" (Nashe, 1987: 244). Thus the only aspects worth translating for the reader are the elements of the delivery, in this case the gestures of the speakers. Although Jack claims to have understood, he remarks on the fact that

"They utter nothing to make a man laugh, therefore I will leave them" (Nashe, 1987: 244). The account of gestures remains the only accessible part; conclusions sealed by spreading arms, sweat when a part of a syllogism was denied, changes of voices when arguments are bad. Again the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* gives us a lead (*Rhet. Her.* 3.15.26):

Motus est corporis gestus et vultus moderatio quaedam quae probabiliora reddit ea quae pronuntiantur.

Physical movement consists in a certain control of gesture and mien which renders what is delivered more plausible.

Rabelais' *La Vie de Gargantua et Pantagruel* presents in the second book a debate between Panurge and an Englishman. The debate begins with an agreement: exchange will take place only through signs, with no words. Rabelais amplifies the caricature of Nashe by making gestures the very language of the debate. Of course, the rhetorical confrontation between Panurge and Thaumast will take place in public. Physical appearance comes in the form of a huge Pantagruel who Thaumast, borrowing from *Phaedros*, qualifies under classical precepts: "ce dict Platon, prince de philosophes, que si l'image de science et sapience estoit corporelle et spectable és yeux humains, elle exciteroit tout le monde en admiration de soi" (Rabelais, 1854: 122). Pantagruel and Thaumast determined the point of departure, in this case the use of signs for the exchange, and the premises:

je ne veulx disputer *pro et contra*, comme font de sots sophistes de ceste ville, et ailleurs. Semblablement, je ne veulx disputer en la manière des académiques par déclamation, ni aussi par nombres comme faisoit Pythagoras, et comme voulut faire Picus Mirandula à Rome. Mais je veulx disputer par signes seulement sans parler: car les matières sont tant ardues, que les paroles humaines ne seroient suffisantes à les expliquer à mon plaisir (Rabelais, 1854: 122).

No further rules are given or known to either the reader or the spectators of the debate. For the reader, as one of the possible audiences, this fact constitutes an indication of the irrelevance of the language itself, and a suggestion of the perhaps more central issues that the passage deals with. In this light the success of the "good start" dissolves itself upon making explicit that not even a painful deciphering will allow us to understand the debate. In Lyotard's terms, such a lack of restrictions in the language would leave too much open space for speculation because "the more you specify rules for the validation of phrases, the

more you can distinguish different ones, and conceive other idioms" (Lyotards, 1988: 17). So, the conditions for a reception of the debate in ideal terms appear already highly impaired for the reader, unless what is to be received is something altogether different. Pantagruel's answer seems to confirm our predictions (Rabelais, 1854: 122):

...Et loue grandement la manière d'arguer que as proposée, c'est assavoir par signes sans parler; car ce faisant toi et moi nous entendrons, et serons hors de ces frapements de mains, que font ces badaulx sophistes, quand on argüe, alors qu'on est au bon de l'argument.

Thus, everything indicates the kind of reception one should expect. Once again, a serious presentation of a mocking rhetorical debate alerts the reader as in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. However, in this case, the introduction to the debate respects most of the classical precepts of rhetoric. The conscious avoiding of hand clapping is a reference to what had been considered by Aristotle an evidence: the hearers themselves become the instruments of proof when emotion is stirred in them by the speech.

While Thaumast had come to Pantagruel seeking the truth about certain matters, the confirmation for such a truth(s) is supposed to be held away from an audience. The presence of supposed addressees creates a complete picture of the debate. The reader, who has already very definite expectations, must begin to look at that picture in a more global way since the premises that constitute the starting point divest of relevance the contents of the debate.

"Tout le monde assistant et escoutant en bonne silence", the debate begins. A series of comic gestures is apparently addressing matters of importance for Thaumast, who is replied to by Panurge. Panurge has taken the place of Pantagruel on the basis of competence or ability. At some point, during the session of gestures, Thaumast speaks: "Et si Mercure...". Panurge appeals to the fact that through consensus a *koinologia* had previously been established and the use of words is not contemplated by it: "Vous avez parlé, masque" (Rabelais, 1854: 123).

There are two related implications in this short exchange of words. On the one hand, there seems to be understanding on the part of Thaumast who cannot help "his passion" about the subject and wants to go deeper into it. On the other hand, Panurge, who is obviously making up all sort of gestures in a very comic way, defends himself from the risk of making evident his masquerade. Lyotard asks a question in this respect: "What if the opponent strives to hide that he or she does not

observe the rules of cognition, and acts as if he or she were observing them?" (Lyotard, 1988: 19). The identification of what Thaumast thinks as the referent poses a problem of reception and implies that understanding creates by itself a referent whether or not it has been actually conveyed. The reality of Panurge's referents could be questioned, but the understanding displayed by Thaumast puts into question our questioning: "Real or not, the referent is presented in the universe of a phrase, and it is therefore situated in relation to some sense" (Lyotard, 1988: 42). Whether or not one can consider Panurge's sets of gestures as phrases becomes somewhat irrelevant because Thaumast shows understanding of them.

Interpretation creates a referent and from this moment on understanding can be achieved, giving to the mocking debate a sense of reality that we, as readers, did not foresee. Much in the same manner in which Thaumast understands Panurge's gestures, upon seeing a specific movement of the hands, the audience interprets according to its condition (Rabelais, 1854: 123). The audience in *The Unfortunate Traveller* follows the same line of action, judging the disputations through the gestures and evaluating the contents by disregarding the referent.

The presence of classical rhetorical constraints and the careful arrangement of its elements create in both cases the illusion of a well-conducted debate in these two Renaissance works. In the end that illusion, together with the mock-orators, is what ultimately configures an example of transgression through a parody of formal oral communication: early novelistic discourse groping for its limits and experimenting, this time, with the precepts of rhetorical delivery.

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