ABSTRACT
                 Rhetoric is capable of producing preceptions which
observed reality does not reveal to us. Because of rhetoric's
reifying powers (that is, its ability to make abstractions concrete),
it has been depended upon to make certain societal values come to
life. In opposition to Jacques Ellul, an articulate expcnent of the
view that finds no existential value in public discourse,
communication provides four important perceptions of people that
could not otherwise exist: a sense of community, a sense of
agreement, a sense of time, and a sense of faithfulness. When it
succeeds in creating these senses, rhetoric gives to community,
agreement, time, and faithfulness a kind of existential dignity which
people have come to rely on greatly. Although rhetoric reifies, we
must be careful not to claim rhetoric to be as all-powerful as the
determinist does, nor should we dismiss rhetoric as having little
existential power as does the enervaticnist. To suggest that rhetoric
is bereft of existential satisfaction is extreme; rhetoric reifies,
thereby giving status to otherwise obscure ideas and feelings.
(JF)

RHETORIC AND REIFICATION

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RHETORIC AND REIFICATION

Contemporary rhetorical theory traces its roots to literary, philosophical, aesthetic, and psychological concerns. In addition, Richard Weaver, Kenneth Burke, and Hugh Duncan have established that socio-political understandings of rhetorical acts can be especially heuristic. This paper follows in that tradition by tracing the generative function of rhetorical activity. I propose here that rhetoric functions creatively, which is to say that it is capable of producing perceptions which phenomenal reality refuses to release to us. Rhetoric reifies, thereby giving existential status to otherwise inchoate ideas and feelings. Because it has such reifying powers, rhetoric has long been depended upon to make certain societal values come to life, even though those values are not substantiated--clearly and completely-- by empirical reality.

The general argument I shall present this morning is not without its detractors. Some persons claim that environments created out of the stuff of communication are in no sense real. Jacques Ellul, for example, is perhaps the most articulate exponent of those who find no existential value in public discourse. A former freedom fighter in the underground during the Nazi occupation of France, Ellul had ample reason to distrust the political communication he had heard. 'We must reject past and present myths,' says Ellul (1967:4), 'and attain full consciousness of the political reality as it actually exists.' Ellul aruges that sound and speech are poor alternatives for substance and that a 'regime that talks most of some value is a regime that consciously

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or unconsciously denies that value and prevents it from existing'
(p. 6). Because 'political men like to delude themselves and give
benediction to their actions by attributing values to them,' Ellul
(1967:94) asserts, social affairs are fatefully contaminated and the
rhetoricalisation of political life becomes a unique product of our
age.

Some contemporary evidence suggests (1) that Ellul's understanding
of history is mistaken, (2) that all persons, not just politicians,
are deluders of sorts and (3) that people rather consciously opt for
such delusions at times. I do not believe, as Ellul does, that people
have full realities apart from their symbolic realities or that slippage
between rhetorical behavior and empirical fact is warrant for turning
our backs on either rhetoric or humankind. Perhaps because he cannot
brook adsurdism, Ellul refuses to acknowledge citizens' prodigious
capacities to take life much less seriously than it is presented to
them by their political leaders.

In outlining the perspective which Ellul has decried, I shall
argue that if it were not for communication four important things
could not exist for people: (1) a sense of community, (2) a sense of
agreement, (3) a sense of time, and (4) a sense of faithfulness. When
it succeeds in creating these senses, rhetoric gives to community,
agreement, time and faithfulness a kind of existential dignity which
people have come to rely upon greatly.

Sense of Community

Wilson Carey McWilliams' The Idea of Fraternity in America lists
three root conditions which must be fulfilled before fraternity can
exist in a culture. These conditions are: (1) no continuous war
or crisis, (2) a limited geographical territory, and (3) a nonmaterialistic
standard of value. Since the United States fails to meet any of these
three conditions, McWilliams suggests that we have had to settle for
'the greatest approximations [of fraternity] possible' and that we must
now discard our old notions of a 'community of place' and opt instead
for something more realistic in contemporary times. But what? Michael
McGee (1975:242) provides the answer, it seems, when he implies that
community can best be fabricated through communication. '"The people,"'
he argues, 'are more process than phenomenon. That is, they are conjured
into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has
force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection
of individuals.' In other words, to establish some semblence of
belongingness and cohesiveness in modern society, we must talk as if
we were one in the spirit.

My argument here does not imply that the mere assertion of communal
spirit creates it in fact. It does suggest, however, that empirical
realities such as military defeats, civil strife, poverty, rampant crime,
and the like, are not necessarily forces which debilitate communitas.
It also suggests that a reified community, what Hall (1972-53) would
call a 'political culture' can exist in the absence of a cohesive,
coherent, and integrated belief system.

McClosky's (1964) important piece of research sharpens the notion
being advanced here. What McClosky found was that the American people
(whose political attitudes he surveyed) supported ideas like liberty
in the abstract but were sharply divided about what sorts of freedoms
should be allowed in practice. Most people possessed only a 'rudimentary
understanding of democratic ideology' (p. 375), McClosky discovered,
and there appeared to be precious little consensus about political
rights and wrongs. Such an image of the American electorate contradicts
most textbook visions, says McClosky. But the important point for us
to note here is that McClosky was not at all dismayed by what he found:

> Our first and most obvious conclusion is that
> contrary to the familar claim a democratic society
> can survive despite widespread popular misunderstanding
> and disagreement about basic democratic and constitutional
> values. The American political system survives and
> even flourishes under precisely these conditions, and
> so, we have reason to think, do other viable democracies.
> What makes this possible is a more conjectural question
> . . . . . (p. 376)

The answer to McClosky's query is, I believe, rhetorical processes.
Through rhetorical transactions, even through 'empty' rhetorical trans-
actions like campaign speeches, patriotic orations, and political
prayer breakfasts, people oftentimes derive as much consensus as they
desire. Perhaps they know, deep inside of them, that human groups
harbor more potential alienation than affection. And so, they may
reason, why not opt for rhetorically generated senses of community?

Illusions, after all, do have their values. While none of us has become less mortal by whistling through the graveyard, it does seem to make the journey less harrying.

Sense of Agreement

Although it is rarely acknowledged, it appears that citizens in modern democracies use rhetoric not just because it can bring them together, but because it can also keep them quite apart. If public rhetoric in a complex social network serves no other purpose than to keep people at arms length, it functions admirably (albeit not optimally). In other words, I want to suggest here that sense of agreement about fundamental issues and aims is oftentimes sufficient in modern social life. I also want to reinforce Martin Spencer's (1970) compelling theoretical case for (1) distinguishing rhetorical realities from empirical realities and (2) acknowledging that the former can control the latter. In his essay, Spencer seeks to explain why law-and-order rhetoric has perseverated in the face of massive civil disobedience. Spencer sharpens the anomaly when he says that although legal rhetoric is widely used, 'the value of legal behavior does not appear to be deeply internalized by a majority of citizens' (p. 603). Spencer goes on to explain:

> Any group that finds itself in a position such that
> its interests require an illegal action, e.g.,
> labor unions or protesters, knows that it will suffer
> from a rhetorical disadvantage in public debate.
> Thus groups may hesitate to violate laws in America,

not because of strong commitments to legality, but
because of the weight of public opinion that may be
mobilized against them by the use of the legal rhetoric.
Another interesting facet of the legal rhetoric, and
of rhetorics in general, is that ordinarily the
rhetoric cannot be challenged. There are special
circumstances in which this is not true, but in
most cases the response to a rhetorical thrust, if
made at all, must be in terms of the rhetoric itself,
or of another prevailing rhetoric. Thus us the case
of the call for "law and order," it is not possible
to say "law and order to blazes. . ." The response
of law and order and justice is possible, but unless
a strong alternative rhetoric is available the group
that is disadvantaged by the rhetoric must in effect
grin and bear it. It quickly becomes clear, if
the implications of this analysis are followed, that
the dynamics of public debate in any community are
structured by the fabric of prevailing rhetorics. (pp. 604-5)

In a sense, Spencer is arguing that rhetorical precedent can
become socio-political precedent. By regulating racist rhetoric to
the back-burner, he says (p. 621), the mass media help to make racial
mayhem an unlikely eventuality. Spencer argues that legal rhetoric
'bestrides the arena of public debate as a great stabilizing force
that says, "this and only this, shall pass. . ." The rhetoric by the
mere fact of its existence, as a diffuse, penetrating and enveloping

"social fact," obscures those courses of action that lie beyond its precincts. Courses of action which are unthinkable in terms of the rhetoric tend not to be thought . . .' (p.621).

One need not be a Polyanna to accept Spencer's argument. He is not so naive as to suggest that public rhetoric roots out all societal evil. He is merely saying that 'democratic cant' can have a 'life independent of the values of the citizenry' (p. 622) and thereby create certain groundrules for social action. As I have suggested earlier, rhetoric can give existential status to ideas (like justice and brotherhood) which human actions themselves belie.

A recent book of mine, The Political Pulpit (1977), illustrates the perspective we have been reviewing here. The book recalls that civil-religious tensions in America have been comparatively modest throughout her two hundred year history as a nation. Given the emotional heat which doctrinalism generates, as well as the inter-denominational skirmishes shot-through the history of the organized church, how is it that America has somehow managed to maintain a semblence of internal harmony on civil-religious matters? I suggest in the book that the American people have managed to institutionalize a rhetorical palliative-- civic piety--and have caused their religious and political leaders to sign a contract regulating their behaviors relative to one another:

> If my conceptual metaphor has any value, it is that
>
> of pointing out the extent to which the American
>
> people have relied on public rhetoric to extricate
>
> themselves from uncomfortable political and social
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> binds. Perhaps because rhetoric is such a useful

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and malleable entity, the American populace have

long agreed to the maxim: that which we cannot

accomplish de jure, we shall effect per rhetorica.

Thus, if America could not survive amicably as a

totally secular state, it had to be provided with

a religious mantle through the agency of public

discourse. If organized religion demands a say-so

in the political and ethical life of the nation, it

must be given precisely that--a say-so. And if the

rhetorics of government and religion clash, resolution

or sublimation must be effected through more rhetoric. (p. 48)

To say that America is a God-fearing nation seems to cost the

American people relatively little, at least when compared to more

patently political arrangements like totalitarianism, theocracy, or

total separation of church and state. And so, the American people

seem willing for even their agnostic presidents to issue God Day

messages and for their more articulate clerics to give the benediction

at patently political gatherings. Even if rhetoric can produce but a

half-cake's worth of religiosity, they reason, it obviates starker

unpleasantries.

Sense of Time

For all of its wondrous accomplishments, rhetoric can hardly

advance time, make it stand still, or cause it to turn back upon

itself. Yet we seem to use rhetoric as if such were possible. Our

street-corner prelates cry out that perdition is at hand. Our
Veterans' groups urge us to relive battles long since quit. Both
sense that we have the capacity (if not the willingness) to participate
in such conjuring. Wherein lies their confidence? What allows them
to assume that rhetoric can somehow arrest the linearity and invincibility
of time?

Precedent, perhaps. Our doomsayers and Legionnaires were taught
through their own rhetorical experiences that Now can be made Then.
They learned that rhetoric can lend a kind of continuity and reasonability
to the past that the past may well wish it had had. Through rhetoric,
participants in the Tercentenary pageant of Lloyd Warner's Yankee City
could say 'not only what history is objectively, but what they now
wished it all were and what they wished it were not. [The pageant
goers] ignored this or that difficult period of time or unpleasant occurance
or embarassing group of men and women; they left out awkward political
passions; they selected small items out of large time contexts, seizing
them to express today's values' (Warner, 1976:373). By resurrecting
events and persons long since dead, ceremonial rhetoric can settle
matters earlier times could not.

For example, a study by Richardson (1954) examined the rhetorical
death rattle of the Confederacy, a series of meetings begun in February,
1865 in Richmond, Virginia which were designed to disinter the once-
glorious South. Richardson found such meetings to be quite popular,
primarily because they gave to the past a wholeness, an evenness, and
a recitude that an empirical history of the times could hardly have

provided. Moore (1975) explains such selective re-creations of the past as attempts to 'fix social reality' and thereby render it somewhat controllable (p. 221). By making the mutable somewhat immutable, rhetoric gives us time to catch our breath.

Rhetoric also displays its suppleness when reifying future events. In a sense, rhetoric can become interlude music which society plays when gearing-up to effect changes demanded by reform groups. Rather clearly, for instance, immediate integration of Southern schools in the United States could not have taken place when the first civil rights' advocate mounted his first public platform. It would take years of opinion-changing and legal interposition before that feat could be accomplished. By implicitly sanctioning public debate on the matter, however, society bought itself some time, time to rearrange itself attitudinally and to ready the social machinery necessary to effect the alterations required. In the meantime, the institutionalizing of civil rights rhetoric and the glorious future it depicted acted as a surrogate for those who would eventually profit from school integration. Rhetoric thus became a kind of existential way-station for the patient.

In attempting to make past present or present future, rhetoric attempts much. That we sometimes deem such reifications acceptable substitutes for tangible realities is a most curious thing indeed. But, few of us, it appears, are without the capacity to luxuriate a bit, even when the exi̲s̲t̲e̲n̲z̲ presses upon us.

Sense of Faithfulness

Because rhetoric operates in both the world of symbolization and
in the world of practical people and their values, it is used to
breathe life into pure constructs. Rhetoric attempts to make such
abstract phenomena as nationhood, duty, and faithfulness-to-the cause
mean something in the empirical world. Several studies have chronicled
how rhetoric gives existence to espirit de corps. Hay's (1969)
interesting study of the liberty tree metaphor as used in early American
history is a case in point. The liberty tree, suggests Hay, gave
solidity to the notion of Freedom, permanence to the sacrifice of
the patriots whose blood nourished it, and nativism to the Americans
who, according to the rhetors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,
planted and cared for it. Because, as Hay suggests, individual citizens
would have defined liberty quite differently, the metaphor substituted
for a national ideology which had not yet been fully worked out.

Perhaps the most captivating study of all along these lines is
Robert Jewett's The Captain American Complex (1973) which traces the
modern permutations of zealous, nationalistic rhetoric. Because such
high-blown and passionate oratory has been their diet, says Jewett,
many contemporary Americans accept no compromise, much less defeat.
'In a holy crusade against Communism,' the rhetoric exhorts, 'Americans
must fulfill their millenial destiny to the full.' Jewett even suggests
that the Vietnam war may have been protracted for many years so that the
nation's self-righteous rhetoric would have its teeth preserved. To
forsake such rhetorical precedents by withdrawing from Vietnam, argues
Jewett, would have psychically threatened the American people. Such

threats 'are fiercely resisted and bitterly resented by Americans because they threaten the mythic base of moral superiority' (p. 222). Even if Jewett's estimation of the reifying power of pro-war rhetoric is only partially correct, the picture he paints is a chilling one indeed.

Conclusion

To suggest that rhetoric can spin viable symbolic cocoons is not to say that that is all that rhetoric can accomplish or that such reified atmospheres suffice for all persons at all times. Similarly, to acknowledge rhetorical reifications is not to embrace either solipsism or rampant impressionism. To accept the perspective of rhetoric I have been outlining does, however, require one to forswear both rhetorical determinism and rhetorical enervationism.

The determinist, for example, takes this reifying business too seriously when claiming that rhetoric is all-powerful, that it directly impinges upon the affairs of men, and that scholars should become symbolic watchdogs for society as a result. The determinist inevitably becomes alarmed at the rhetoric he or she hears, assuming that where there is rhetorical smoke there is always existential fire. Such a viewpoint probably credits rhetorical agencies with more influence than they universally deserve. The determinist fails to sense that many of us do not listen to what we hear even when the voices around us are loud and insistent. Those of us who do listen oftentimes do not believe. Those of us who believe may fail to do

anything about it. Contrary to what Merelman (1966:557) says, most

crises do not result when governments attempt 'to substitute a new set

of metasymbols for an old set.' Rather, they more likely eventuate

when borders are threatened, when religious icons are destroyed, and

when starvation is rampant. Naturally, rhetoric is extraordinarily

powerful. But the existence of a plea does not, _ipso facto_, make

that plea an empirical reality.

The enervationist is the converse of the determinist and holds that

little existential power resides within rhetoric. The enervationist

does not believe in the creative function of rhetoric discussed here

nor does he or she believe that symbolic satisfaction can ever substitute

for empirical success. To an enervationist like Jacques Ellul (1967:94),

'the insertion of values into the discussion of political acts is

never more than just words.' According to Ellul (1967:5), rhetoric is

either inherently obstructionistic or simply ineffectual; it is illusory,

a fleeting presence, a magical incantation.

In my opinion, Ellul has been too harsh on rhetoric. Granted,

rhetors always do deceive in that they direct us toward only selected

portions of reality. Granted, too, that many listeners become so

caught up in the symbolic realm that they fail to monitor the practical

forces around them. But to suggest that rhetoric is bereft of existential

satisfaction is to go too far. Mere rhetoric is hardly ever as mere as

the popularists would have us believe. Cultural data are made available

(obliquely perhaps) when an American president champions human rights

in the midst of massive, contrary empirical evidence. It is significant

that almost all societies talk about peace, even though the world has seen precious little of same. Most of us do not expect miracles from public talk, but whether we admit it or not we want at least to hear about peace and human rights. Empirical reality will wend its own inexorable way, we seem to reason. In the meantime, many of us are willing to choose among society's assortment of polite fictions, aware frequently that they are fictions, but content in the knowledge that they are, oftentimes, comfortingly polite..

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