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CONSTRUCTING A WRITER'S VOICE:

ETHOS, TIM CAHILL, AND THE JONESTOWN MASSACRE

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Having a theory about it helps some. Mine was that Jones was paranoid, in the clinical sense, and that he infected others.

—Tim Cahill

For over twenty years, Tim Cahill's writing has appeared in popular publications such as *Outside* and *Rolling Stone*, and in many academic contexts, ranging from remedial and freshman composition textbooks to the use of his novels and short story collections in a variety of upper division literary courses. Cahill, then, is a "bridge" writer who has crossed over from the mainstream to academics, or vice versa. When describing the style of his own writing Cahill often refers to it as travel or adventure writing that tests the limits of reality. Cahill frequently writes about such high-adrenaline topics as skydiving for the first time or rafting down a Himalayan river. Cahill's writing is exciting, descriptive, and also complex. His place in English Studies, especially in the genre of non-fiction prose, is fitting as his writing entertains and challenges the reader on a variety of levels that may only be understood through employing a variety of literary and critical techniques. To date, no treatment of Cahill's writing voice exists that employs a rhetorical approach, specifically an analysis of how Cahill creates a convincing ethos. One work that is particularly suited for such an analysis is his "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death" where one may glimpse Cahill going through a physical and metaphorical exploration of the darker side of humanity in an account of the mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana.

Through several levels of discourse and a conscious effort to involve the reader in the scene around him, Cahill

impresses his own values in ways that may not be so obvious to the reader. By these means, Cahill establishes credibility on several levels, and reveals much about his own motive in writing about such a place in the form he has chosen. Cahill's skillful construction of good characters and good will create a strong reader-writer relationship; with this he goes on to demonstrate good sense, and in so doing leads readers to share his conclusions about Jim Jones and the Jonestown massacre. To access the working behind his writing voice, or in other words, to understand why Cahill's writing voice works the way it does, this essay will explore the Classical notion of *ethos* and its component parts of *arête*, *eunoia*, and *phronesis*. In such rhetorical analysis I hope to go beyond New Critical or New Historicist work currently popular in analyzing bridge writers in contemporary non-fiction prose studies. Also, such an analysis signals the way ideas from Classic rhetoricians such as Corax and Isocrates can be used to deepen current literary analysis and expand the philosophical and ethical concerns texts produce between readers and writers and the world they occupy, on and off the page.

Cahill's writing works well for the previously stated purpose for several reasons. First, many genuinely enjoy reading his prose and are excited by the ability of his writing to come alive. His topic matter is diverse and interesting and fascinates one with the way he can describe and encapsulate unconventional experiences—such as skydiving, spelunking, deep sea diving, extreme skiing—in clear, accessible language. Cahill also has an investigative side which often places him in the real world of human relation. Whether it is as an ape watcher in Zaire, or as a decoy convert in a New Age religion in California, Cahill's ability to narrate through a situation is both artful and discreet, and reveals much of himself and the workings around him. While the topic of the Jonestown suicides may seem a dark abyss around which to center an analysis of writing voice and *ethos*, coming to terms with this tragedy helps one realize the importance of seeing rhetoric as functioning in almost all situations. This analysis also helps educate about the situation surrounding the events in Jonestown nearly 30 years ago.

Cahill is also an aesthetic writer who is not afraid to incorporate literary allusions or provocative social and psychological commentaries on what motivates people to act as they do. He is an author unafraid to expose his mind at work in experiencing and relating the particulars of a situation, and this is exciting. While critical academic work addressing Cahill exists almost exclusively in relation to his travel writing, his prose style and sense of self within such an essay as “In the Valley of the Shadow of Death” begs for a wider academic audience, showing how purposeful, directed writing from the popular press merits serious intellectual attention, particularly in studying how voice functions as a persuasive element in the appeal of a writer to a reader.

By arriving in Jonestown nine days after the suicides, Cahill established the exigency of reporting on the disaster first-hand. While news cameras and photographers may garner more exposure and acclaim from the public than feature writing, Cahill's first-hand account resonates with more knowledge and humanity than a news release one may read in the paper or see on television. The political milieu surrounding Jonestown also proves intriguing with whispers of international espionage and CIA involvement in the running of religious colonies such as Jonestown. Only a few days before the suicides, Peoples Temple leader Jim Jones claimed responsibility for shooting down a plane carrying a US Congressman from Guyana. This downing of Congressman Ryan's plane may be the first time many Americans heard of Jones and the situation in Guyana specifically. In other words, Jonestown and the nine hundred members of Jim Jones's Peoples Temple became an object of bizarre fascination for all of America virtually overnight, and as a member of the first group of reporters to be allowed into Jonestown, Cahill situates himself as an expert witness “on the scene” who is surrounded by like-minded journalists and newscasters. In this sense, Cahill legitimates himself as a valuable member of the press corps and eases any doubts in the reader's mind as to his access to the recently quarantined area in Guyana.

The reliability and credibility of Cahill's actual account is perhaps the most important factor to consider in judging the persuasiveness of the essay on the reader. Loosely assembled, this construct of believing an author's truthfulness and sincerity is identified by Aristotle as *ethos*. In Classical times, *ethos* pertained to moral sensibility, and proved to Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, the most significant factor in convincing an audience of the speaker's claim to knowledge in certain types of discourse. In order to unravel and explore such a complex issue as *ethos* in relation to “In the Valley of the Shadow of Death,” it may help to first look at the component of *arête* in Cahill's story itself.

Most often *arête* is translated from the Ancient Greek as the speaker's "good character" in accordance with its use by such thinkers as Aristotle; however, modern definitions of *arête* "attempt to involve the reader in the progressive development of the argument" (Sipiora 276). Cahill's writing expresses his good character through accurate physical descriptions and judicious speculations as to the causes of the devastation of Jonestown's inhabitants. From his initial descent into Jonestown, Cahill involves the reader in the sights and sounds of his experience: "It was awesome, frightening, and my guess is that every reporter on the chopper, reminded of Joseph Conrad's descriptions of the jungle, scribbled *Heart of Darkness* in their notes, as I did" (108). Cahill's use of literary allusion also brings the knowing reader further along the mental journey Cahill finds himself in as the teller of this story. By alluding to such famous and respected literature as *Heart of Darkness*, and later Orwell's *1984*, Cahill shows his good character in defining Jonestown alongside other equally terrifying representations of the modern century. The use of Conrad also brings into play another realm of dark and sophisticated horror that will eventually play out through the description of Jonestown leader Jim Jones and the society built around him.

More brutal and grotesque descriptions of Jonestown follow as Cahill inches his way around the remains of the village after the mass suicide only nine days earlier. In this survey of the actual scenery at Jonestown, Cahill constructs his character as a sensible and humane person deeply troubled and concerned with the blatant disregard of life enacted during the massacre. Much of Cahill's description comes across as what may be considered "objective" by news reporting standards today. By this, Cahill's description of the scene at Jonestown is assembled as a collection of images and physical descriptions. Figurative language does come into play; however, the metaphors are not directly, or at least blatantly, addressed to any political or ideological comment. With this in mind, Cahill's main concern appears only to be crafting to the reader the sensory seizure of Jonestown:

To get to the pavilion proper, we had to step across muddy rills, and the thought of the ocher-colored mud clinging to our shoes was unpleasant....Tractors [that were used to bury dead bodies] had not yet been inside. The smell was bad, and several of us gagged. In front of the stage, along with a collection of musical instruments, were several bits of gore: blackened flesh, shriveled skin, all crawling with flies. On the wall were signs that said LOVE ONE ANOTHER, and the like. (109)

In examining this passage, the subject "we" at once places Cahill within the drove of reporters, thus increasing his accountability, and enticingly invites the reader to follow along with her senses as Cahill filters the images surrounding him into print. Cahill also draws the reader away from the physical gore to a literary or symbolic equation of the events. In this case, the sign "LOVE ONE ANOTHER" draws the reader to the tremendous amount of irony implied in Cahill's decision to actually write about and "report" on such a brutal and cathartic scene as Jonestown. Interestingly, the sign from Jonestown could serve as one of the few artifacts Cahill includes in his story. The implied second-person subject of the slogan "LOVE ONE ANOTHER" is another invitation to the reader to glimpse the method behind Jones's madness.

On another and less apparent level of analysis, Cahill impresses his political and ideological views about Jones through such representations as "LOVE ONE ANOTHER" which leads the reader—through the use of enthymeme—to draw particular conclusions about the mendacity of Jones's message of salvation and the suicidal path to it. Cahill's decision to temper his conventional reactions of awe and disgust to the scene around him allows this subtler, yet powerful, method of appeal in conveying the goodness of his character in discerning emotion from fact. In the following passage, Cahill again gives another rather factual sounding a few minutes later in Jonestown:

We were shown a bakeshop, a machine shop, a brick-making area. We noted packets of a Kool Aid-like drink called Fla •vor•aid lying around. The illustration showed two children sipping Fla •vor•aid and smiling happily. There were shoes in the mud and on the grass and in the fields. A disproportionate number were children's shoes, sandals no bigger than the palm of your hand. (110-111).

With this passage, Cahill uses another enthymeme to form a pathetic appeal in asking the reader to consider the fate of the 200+ children in Jonestown that fateful day 17 years ago. By allowing the reader to compare the smiling faces of the children on the beverage packets and the hundreds of empty shoes, Cahill could be said to be invoking powerful imagery of the Holocaust, and equating Jones with a coward who ordered the death of children with feet “no bigger than the palm of your hand” (111). It is through this sort of narrative technique and use of enthymeme that Cahill constructs his good character most substantially with the reader.

The effectiveness of Cahill's previous passage regarding the suicidal drink becomes especially artful and persuasive when compared to another reporter's rendition of the incident. For example, Michael Novak, a professor of religion at Syracuse University and columnist for the *Washington Star* writing in 1979, dresses the KoolAid incident in completely different clothing:

On many occasions, Jim Jones made all of his followers drink a red liquid. Sometimes he told them in advance that they were about to drink poison, sometimes he told them after they had drunk it that they would die in fifteen minutes. Thus, socialist suicide was enacted not once but many times. The early rituals, Jones explained, were a “loyalty test”. (7)

When compared to Cahill's, Novak's account comes across as a sterile and lifeless representation of the incident. In fact, one almost forgets that innocent children constituted at least 25% of the victims in the mass suicide. While Novak may be writing for a completely different reason than Cahill, Novak loses credibility in terms of good character by merely glossing over the incident as one of many that all may somehow be judged commensurate. Novak also fails to add any resounding depth on account of advancing his own anti-socialist agenda. Cahill's account may be seen to advance the same message in a much more subtle and accessible way by challenging Jones and the Peoples Temple's familial values which were quite revolutionary in their time. This last point becomes especially meaningful as the reader realizes, through Cahill's account, that Jones was called “Dad” by all his followers (110) .

With such descriptions and allusions to the madness behind Jonestown and its leader, Cahill constructs himself as a trustable and reliable person who values human life and shares the common morals and world view of “normal” people—such as most of his readers, presumably — not involved with Jones's activities. By proving himself trustworthy and reputable to the reader, Cahill's *arête* constitutes a “virtuousness, meritoriousness and goodness of service” (Angeles 17) in his account of Jonestown. This convincing assemblage of “good character” and “solicit[ing] of reader participation” (Sipiora 272) in the construction of the narrator's as someone the reader can believe suggests Cahill's use of *arête* is a powerful force that moves the persuasive appeal of the essay along.

Another aspect of Cahill's ethos in the essay is exhibited in the concept of *eunoia*. As an aspect of rhetorical appeal, *eunoia* is helpful in understanding exactly how a speaker or writer establishes a relationship with her reader by joining “the rhetor and audience in a common endeavor,...in common goals,...and a recognition of community value” (Sipiora 276). Building on this definition, Carey notes that “*eunoia* can be invited with reference to the situation as well as the personality projected by the speaker” (415). With this in mind, *eunoia* can be said to come from Cahill's own comments about himself as well as the situations he directs the reader's

attention to. Through the use of pronouns and rhetorical questioning, Cahill weaves some interesting possibilities for allowing the reader to feel a close relationship to his impressions and perspectives, as well as the scene of Jonestown itself.

In bringing closure to his first exposure to the carnage of Jonestown, Cahill extends an invitation for the reader to speculate with him upon what the future would hold for Jonestown. “A soldier said the Guyanese might continue the communal agriculture experiment Jones began. We wondered who could work there, what kind of men and women would be required to spend their nights in those awful, empty cottages” (111). With this sense of closeness to Cahill, a reader may find herself standing beside Cahill recollecting the horrible images that have just previously passed. Cahill's disapproval of anyone actually trying to live in “those awful, empty cottages” marks a sense of community value in leaving the Jonestown site uninhabited and as a memorial for all who visit. Perhaps in instances such as this, Cahill offers his most value-loaded statements of the essay apart from the apparent reporting “fact”. Although he never goes as far as making direct disparaging remarks against Jones, Cahill does implant evidence and ideas in the reader's mind to see the lunacy of the leadership of Jonestown. Selecting to impress these sentiments during *eunoia*'s moments of close relationship with the reader enhances Cahill's ethos also appealing to pathos—the emotional enthymemes fingering the evil impetus of the suicides—only when the reader is in an almost “intimate” position to see Cahill's mind and take his word at face value.

Furthermore, Cahill grounds his character and appeal to the reader to endorse his view as he poses even more familiar intonations with an ironic Americanizing of the scene: “Someone else said that the Guyanese had considered making Jonestown a tourist attraction. A tourist attraction? What would they call it? Club Dead?” (111). With this rhetorical maneuver, Cahill makes sure the questions “are framed in such a way that the reader challenges his or her own intelligence if he or she questions the proposition” (Sipiora 277). Allowing the reader to speculate, even if for a moment, on alternatives to his next position is a very skillful and intentional move by Cahill. Most readers, realizing the shame in taking a split second to think of the possibilities in developing Jonestown, will quickly join Cahill and his perspective in hopes of not being left behind in the common endeavor of making some sort of meaning of the tragedy. With such an effect as this, it does not take long for the reader to identify herself as perhaps one of the reporters Cahill commiserates with in the base hotel of Guyana's capital Georgetown. Cahill's technique of distancing and identifying with the rabble of reporters is two-fold. On one hand, he wishes to impart the sense of inquiry which unites everyone stationed in Guyana. For example, in describing the first “official” interview of the Jonestown survivors, Cahill states “...we assaulted the survivors in the Graham Greene Room at the Park [Hotel in Georgetown]” (102). This pack mentality of the reporters leaves the reader empathizing for the traumatized survivors in the face of a media concerned with nothing more than breaking a sensational story for the folks back home.

On the other hand, Cahill reminds the reader to be a cool outsider who can see beyond the numbing anonymity of the masses. In persuading survivor Odell Rhodes to join him in an isolated room, Cahill positions the reader as an intimate associate in this behind-the-scenes interview. In describing the catalyst for this exclusive interview, Cahill writes: “The first time we met [Cahill met Rhodes], he spotted a forty-ounce duty-free bottle of Jack Daniel's in my case. We drifted up to my room where it was quieter. We sipped the bourbon, strong and sweet and straight, out of Park Hotel water glasses” (105). With this scene, Cahill has brought the reader a tremendous distance in terms of the pronoun “we.” In these last two instances discussed, the “we” Cahill refers to is markedly different from the “we” discussed in the section on *arête* . In other words, Cahill uses the credibility of the conception of “we” coming of the helicopter and into the jungle as a base of authority to validate his claim as an honest informant in the hotel room with Rhodes . The “we” in this last case is literally, Cahill and Rhodes, yet the reader is tempted to sit beside Cahill and sip the sweet bourbon of Cahill's own “exclusive” view of Rhodes . Without the design of the pronoun “we” to carry such rhetorical weight, Cahill's account of Rhodes in this secluded scene could be dismissed as fictitious or fabricated; however, by this point in the essay, Cahill leaves the reader searching, with him, for a shred of sanity in the Jonestown tragedy, and Rhodes seems to offer some hope in terms of having survived the suicides and murders of the last few days.

Distinct from *arête* and *eunoia*, *phronesis* is a classical term that is generally taken to mean “good sense” and involves presenting oneself as reasonable and legitimate to the reader. Sipiora argues much the same thing in

that “the force of *phronesis*...[is] the appeal to common sense, as a rhetorical stratagem” (282). As mentioned, *phronesis*, as a rhetorical strategy, leads the reader to common sense insights and intuitive claims to knowledge that ultimately underscore the appeal of the author in terms of *ethos*. With this in mind, Cahill creates the effect of *phronesis* by directing the reader to make meaning behind the seeming madness of events and descriptions up to this point in the essay. Without leaving much to the imagination in terms of imagery, Cahill displays his good sense in depicting the reality of most Jonestown residents toward the last few months. In shifting to the second person pronoun “you,” Cahill places the reader directly in the horrible conditions Jonestown residents endured: “Complaints about the food were always dealt with harshly. There were maggots in the rice, and you either ate in the light and picked them out or, if too exhausted, sat in the dark and ate a lot of maggots”(116). With such a situation in hand, the reader is left with no real answer or refutation to Cahill's stark picture of trying to attain nourishment in Jonestown. In this sense, Cahill tries to make the reader realize how “self-evident” his claims are, and should logically be taken as a measure of his good sense in figuring the insidious design behind the control of most Jonestown residents.

While the allure of Jones as a madman and the people of Jonestown as crazed fanatics appeals to the sensationalism of the media, Cahill uses this same scene to establish good sense in alluding to the often-forgotten living conditions of Jonestown residents that in no way helped them see things as clearly as Cahill or the reader would like. Building on this concept, Cahill's description of escape from Jonestown shows the actual amount of choice a Jonestown resident enjoyed:

Rumor had it that captured escapees had their arms broken. Toward the end, most of them were simply placed in the euphemistically named Extra Care Unit, where they were drugged senseless for a week at a time. Patients emerged from the ECU unable to carry on conversations, and their faces were blank, as if they had been temporarily lobotomized. (112)

While these claims may seem rather unreal at first, Cahill underscores their validity with a rather succinct quote from Jonestown survivor, Stanley Clayton, in regard to the corporeal punishment exacted on deviant behavior: “They beat the shit out of us” (114). With this actual account of Clayton, and the scenario described above in the ECU, Cahill leaves little room for doubt in his claim to be offering common sense statements about the way Jonestown really was. In retrospect, this is a rather incredible claim by Cahill considering that only two survivors (Rhodes and Clayton) whose accounts are the basis of this claim could be scrutinized on account of their lack of nourishment, and in the case of Clayton frequent beatings. Doubting Cahill here would go against the common sense motif he has laid down like steps to a descending staircase.

In a rather complex scene, we may sift through Cahill's apparent process of discovery and see the persuasive power of emphasis packed into a supposed attempt on Jones's life a few weeks before the suicides. In opening this episode, Cahill opts for referencing a witness: “In September, 1977, shots were fired at Jones from the bush. They were real shots. Tim Carter, who was standing with Jones at the time, swears to it” (117). After this seemingly objective account, Cahill switches from the active voice of Carter to a passive construction: “The shots were said to come from mercenaries, mercenaries hired by the Human Freedom Movement [the Berkeley group of Temple defectors]” (117). This technique of switching information and directing the point of view barely gives the reader time to see; first, the shots whiz; second, Carter's reaction; and finally, the network of conspiracy alluded to in the HFM paying off mercenaries in Guyana.

While Cahill may appear to be merely directing the reader to important incidents he has encountered through others, the author is skillfully constructing a web of conspiracy theory and a base of paranoia he believes to be undermining the entire relationship between Jim Jones and his followers: “It seemed absurd on the face of it. Mercenaries, hired by the shadowy hand of the CIA, make their way to Jonestown, to level their sophisticated weapons, take one shot, and miss? Jim Bogue and Harold Cordell concluded that the shots were ‘self-inflicted,’

that they were fakery and theater” (117). Cahill's work with appearance versus reality in this supposed assassination scene is just one method in which he wishes to convey his own “good sense” (or *phronesis*) in the context of the essay and discredit Jones without using direct statement. By pushing his beliefs about Jones through this narrative pretense, Cahill uses the accounts of two witnesses who share his view, and who in turn could potentially shoulder any criticism a reader may have toward the chain of events.

In bridging away from this previous scene, Cahill points out Jones's increasing development of paranoia in helping the reader discern, along with the author, what is again fitting behavior, or “good sense,” in terms of sanity: “The rains came early, and Jones told the community that the CIA had seeded the clouds. He reminded them of the time he was driving in California and a driverless car tried to run him off the road. Who has a device *that* sophisticated? The answer was obvious. [The CIA.] And now there were mercenaries in the trees” (118-119). By the end of this exchange, Cahill implants a feeling of discovery in the reader through her seeing the methods behind the madness that was to eventually culminate into the mass suicides in Jonestown.

By pointing out several incidents that deal with everything from the food at Jonestown to the mounting delusions of its leader, Cahill has impressed much upon the reader in terms of what has gone wrong within the town in terms of common sense. The blending in of more complex narrative techniques helps to add richness to this appeal to good sense that makes it especially hard for the reader to refute under most circumstances. After all, who would want to eat maggots instead of rice and believe a driverless car running off a road? The answer is obvious: nobody. It is with this sense of control and careful delivery of key events that makes Cahill's ethos especially credible in terms of *phronesis* and the appeal to good sense.

From the outset, making sense of such an event as Jonestown is extremely difficult, if not impossible. The event has even exhausted Cahill, who poses his final thoughts as deeply concerned and bewildered by the end of the ordeal: “I found that, after staring into the face of horror for two weeks, all I could do was....watch Popeye cartoons in Spanish while my mind spun and slipped gears” (127). While Cahill may seem baffled and distraught at the end of the essay, his construction of *ethos* throughout the essay is anything but confused. By carefully selecting what he will bring in and out of the account of Jonestown, Cahill has constructed a very credible and believable *ethos*. From this vantage point, Cahill has been able to lead the reader around in terms of showing the actual physical devastation as well as Jones's process of mental decay which served as the fulcrum which ultimately led the tragedies to unfold.

In coming to these sorts of conclusions about Cahill's *ethos* throughout this essay, we must remember “for the projection of *ethos* what is unsaid may be as important as what is said” (Carey 409). With this in mind, much of Cahill's technique of impressing his ideas about Jones and the terrible situation in Jonestown become evident. While Cahill does not come right out and call Jones a drug-addicted lunatic who ultimately was a hypocrite and coward to everything he “preached,” the many enthymemes surrounding the narrative exploration of the carnage in Jonestown offers powerful testament to this. By subverting his sentiments toward Jones and letting the reader make the obvious connections between the conditions and mentality of Jonestown, Cahill's *ethos* has built a sense of empowerment in the reader as she progresses through the essay and discovers event after event of deception and selfishness by Jones toward his followers. By this “empowerment of the reader,” Cahill has carefully gauged the feeling of discovery and good sense that his reader will experience when progressing through the essay, and centers much of his appeal (and success) to the reader in promising this continued sense of discovery and control by believing his *ethos* being led further into the narration.

We would all admit that finding something out, or making a connection between two seemingly unrelated or mysterious points, brings a certain amount of satisfaction to the act of reading; in fact, it is this sense of satisfaction, this pleasure in bringing order to an otherwise chaotic situation, that makes Cahill's *ethos* so believable and ultimately his story a success. As Carey notes, “the use of *ethos*...as a means of persuasion consists in creating through the speech a character [Rhet. 1377b] that will induce the required degree of trust on the part of the hearer” (Carey 406). With such vivid descriptions and allusive suggestions toward why things precipitated as they did in Jonestown, Cahill may be said to have constructed, through the act of writing, an identifiable *ethos* that builds the required amount of trust from the reader to persuade her. Through this

construction of *ethos* Cahill is able to at least minimally convince the reader of his own view of Jones and the events leading up to the tragedy itself.

With the previous analysis in mind, Cahill's depiction and commentary about Jonestown seems fairly accurate and based in good intentions. Perhaps the only voice that can speak of Jones and the suicide with a more credible *ethos* than Cahill is Odell Rhodes, one of the two actual survivors of the last few days of Jonestown:

He made them feel guilty for everything—personally responsible for every bad thing that happened. They felt responsible for Jonestown's failure; they felt responsible because Jim Jones was so depressed he wanted to kill himself. The guilt was a way of life there... (qtd. in Feinsod 213)

It is with this sense of guilt that Cahill constructs his mounting indictment of Jones through the many scenes and spectacles of that fateful visit to Guyana in 1979.

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