

# The Rhetorician's Identity

MAURICE CHARLAND

My work has for the most part focused on Canadian instances of public address, with an emphasis on identity formation (“Technological Nationalism,” “Constitutive Rhetoric;” Dorland and Charland, *Law, Rhetoric and Irony*). In part for this reason, I find questions regarding the relationship between my national identity and my work problematic. This is in part because a recurring theme in my work is that national identity is a rhetorical effect. Admittedly, given Canada’s history, my skepticism regarding identity might seem very Canadian, particularly given my biographical details. Nevertheless, I consider that my work is not an expression of my national identity, but rather serves as a representative anecdote (Burke, *Grammar*) of the imbrication of one’s horizons in intellectual work. Horizons are not reducible to identity. As I have sought to demonstrate, identity is an ideological phenomenon to be explained rather than a foundational category of being preceding and containing scholarship. Indeed, I consider that critical rhetorical scholarship requires stepping outside of national and other identities and their claims.

Against the view of national identity as a foundation or framework for rhetorical analysis, my argument is that rhetoric as a scholarly practice gives rise to its own identity, that of the rhetorician, which is incompatible

with our usual understanding of identity as the cornerstone of being. That is to say, my rhetorician's skepticism regarding the ontological validity of "national identity" as a category does not mean that I reject identity *tout court*. Rather, I propose that we distinguish between two conceptions of identity, one being ontological the other being performative. In "Constitutive Rhetoric," I argued that identity is produced rhetorically through narrative. I was inspired by Kenneth Burke (*Rhetoric*), who argued that rhetoric proceeds through identification, as well as by Michael Calvin McGee ("In Search of 'The People'"), who argued that "the people" exists as a collective fantasy called forth rhetorically by advocates seeking collective action. As such, collective identities arise through tautological rhetorical appeals that seek to induce ideological investments and their materialization through audience enactments. Constitutive rhetoric plays a metaphysical game, positing essences and the illusion of coherent being. It offers attributions and calls for self-ascriptions. Such rhetoric, as McGee and I have argued, is hortatory. National identities make claims on future actions in the name of fictionalized ideals. This is not to deny that certain practices or ideas appear in some places more than others or that state and other formations can sanction or institutionalize certain practices, nominating them as "traditions," but that their normalization as "national" is a consequence of rhetorical work. In other words, as Kenneth Burke was at pains to point out, rhetoric produces identifications and hence consubstantiality. At any point, one can imagine counter-rhetorics that offer other forms of being.

Against an understanding of identity as ontological, I counterpoise identity as performative character. This second way of conceiving identity, or at least something like it, is as a form of life that arises in the performance of a set of normative practices directed toward intrinsic goods in a particular domain. This idea of character is developed by Alisdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, his searing critique of the possibility of coherent moral discourse in the modern world. The details of his moral critique are not relevant here, but his concept of character, based in Aristotle's understanding of *ethos*, stands in opposition to conceptions of being based in reification and myth.

Aristotle's conception of character, of *ethos*, is based in one's performance, in how one enacts oneself (*Rhetoric*, translated by Kennedy 1991). Thus, for Aristotle, *ethos* is not a psychological construct, nor does it refer to a person's "being" in a transcendent sense. The closest that Aristotle comes to the idea of national identity is his observation that political communities or poleis are distinguishable by their constitutions, which define their character or *ethos* and an attendant set of virtues. The ideal citizen or subject virtuously performs this *ethos*. Thus, one's *ethos* is neither fixed nor transcendent, but arises or comes to be through one's ways of acting, through one's habituated performances or practices, against the horizon of a set of formal and informal norms.

Aristotle's conception of *ethos* differs from that of identity because it is non-essential, but based in one's performance, where performance is characterized by its degree of *aretē*, of virtue or virtuosity in various domains of practice. *Ethos* is not restricted to what we might call "the whole person." Thus, one can speak of the virtuosity of the shoemaker, of the athlete, of the orator, of the philosopher, or of the citizen. As MacIntyre explains, each of these domains is constituted in practices directed toward the realization of internal goods, goods inherent to the practice rather than the product of the practice. Thus, for example, the internal good of the art of shoemaking is excellence in craftsmanship arising from a knowledge of tools, materials, and technique. This is not the same as the external good of an excellent shoe. After all, bad shoemakers may produce an excellent shoe by chance while good shoemakers may only have bad leather in stock. Each practice has an attendant character realized in certain performative traits, habits of making. To have (good) virtue, to be virtuous, or to have *aretē*, means that one performs oneself well, and hence becomes a particular kind of person through the enactment of a normatively defined particular identity. Maurice Richard had *aretē* as a hockey player, and when he is remembered or praised, it is in the first instance as a hockey player. One can easily

celebrate him as a *Canadien de Montréal*, a great member of a storied hockey team, but celebrating him as a *Canadien-Français* or a *Québécois* requires considerable—even if everyday—rhetorical work.

McIntyre's account of character as arising out of a normative practice directed toward intrinsic goods brings to the fore the incompatibility between possessing national identity and the character (or contingent identity) of rhetorician. Rhetoric, as a scholarly domain, is constituted in a set of practices that includes the acquisition and application of bodies of knowledge, themselves organized in a somewhat porous but nevertheless learned tradition. To be a rhetorician is to inhabit an ethical domain, to have a *habitus* in Aristotle's if not Bourdieu's sense, and to enact an attendant *ethos*. MacIntyre would say that "rhetorician" is itself a character, which we could also refer to as an identity if we keep in mind that it arises in contingent performance. The rhetorician's practices are teleologically directed toward the realization of rhetoric's interests, which include both expanding our understanding of the manner in which discourse persuades or gives rise to identifications and enhancing or fostering excellence in oratorical performance through education. Admittedly, the rhetorician's practices are not fully scripted: they exist against a historical horizon that spans two millennia. Also, the "tradition" has local variations that become evident as one compares the scholarly work of those affiliated with rhetoric's different learned societies, such as the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, and the Rhetoric Society of America. Nevertheless, such variations cannot be accounted for by national "identity." While Canadians and Americans who are rhetoricians might typically have different practices (itself a dubious proposition), an account of such differences would have far more to do with the way that rhetorical studies has been institutionalized than with the claims for which identity is offered as warrant.

The rhetorician, much like the physician, deals in two kinds of knowledge, and so straddles two epistemological domains, one of which is theoretical or conceptual and treats general principles, while the other is practical.

Furthermore, these two domains interact. The study of practice informs the development of conceptual knowledge, even while theories and concepts guide the analysis of cases. In antiquity, both rhetoric and medicine were known as arts (*teknē*) because they were domains of knowledge concerned with application. Both, however, exceed this definition because they also are constructed upon and refine universal principles. The art of medicine also instantiates and contributes to the science of biology. Similarly, the art of rhetoric instantiates and informs general theories of cognition, of argumentation, and of persuasion even as it directs the rhetor to look for proofs specific to what Bitzer refers to as the “rhetorical situation.” Indeed, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* highlights these two aspects when he refers to rhetoric as both a *dunamis*, a power that can be understood philosophically, and a *teknē*, an art of application. Furthermore, and this is fundamental, rhetoric’s practical domain of application is far more contingent, which is to say historically informed and conditioned than the physician’s, because the latter considers the body primarily as a mechanism. In contrast, rhetorical practice proceeds hermeneutically. Thus, when I discussed constitutive rhetoric, I enacted the *ethos* or identity of rhetorician, even while my doing so was informed by my contingent historical and personal knowledge of Quebec’s nationalist movements, their *pathē*, and their public address. This knowledge is in part local or personal, but does not constitute my identity, where identity is understood as a consubstantial structure of motives. Indeed, this local knowledge and understanding enabled me to identify how national identity is rhetorical and problematic rather than essential. In a sense, I am arguing that the *ethos* of the rhetorician is predicated on analytic distance and so is very much like Barthes’ mythologist, where “when a myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the mythologist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth” (*Mythologies*). The mythologist must be of and apart from his or her community, in order to both understand myth’s meanings and recognize their mythic character. So too is it for the rhetorician, who must focus on rhetoric’s operations and not be seduced by its enchantments. Nevertheless, the mythologist and

rhetorician are not identical, for the former offers only negative critique. The rhetorician's professional estrangement from national identifications does not preclude appreciating eloquence or political virtues.

As Eugene Garver and others have argued, rhetoric is a civic art, which means that it is, at least in certain forms, compatible with—or indeed a complement to—the *ethos* or identity of the citizen (“Truth in Politics”). The citizen and the rhetorician may have certain habits in common. Furthermore, one could argue that good government is one of rhetoric's extrinsic or external goods. Internal or intrinsic goods define a practice, they are constitutive of practice. External goods do not. Excellence in sports or the arts can bring fame and fortune, but these are not constitutive of excellence in themselves. Indeed, as we are too often reminded, external goods may undermine or corrupt practice. Other external goods follow harmoniously from internal goods. Excellence in shoemaking often yields excellent shoes. Rhetorical excellence does not guarantee persuasion, but persuasion may follow. Similarly, the rhetorician's *aretē* might very well promote good citizenship, even as the rhetorician's practice might be informed by an interest in good citizenship. This is possible because the citizen is also a character instantiated in practices.

As I have argued, national identity consists of identifications. In its weakest sense, national identity can mean nationality as indicated on one's passport—but many people hold multiple nationalities. It can signify identification with one's origins, or affinities with origins real or imagined. It can lead to feelings of shared interest and obligation. Such identifications do not in themselves form what MacIntyre calls a character. They do not give rise to sets of normative practices directed toward internal goods. Rather, as Hannah Arendt might say, they make demands and colour judgment (*Human Condition*). In my work as a rhetorician, I have tried my best to resist their seductions.

**Works Cited**

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1959.
- Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Translated by G. A. Kennedy. New York, Oxford UP, 1991.
- Barthes, Roland. "Myth Today." In *Mythologies*, 109–37. New York, Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bitzer, Lloyd. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol., 1 no.1, 1968, pp. 1–14.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley, U of California P, 1969.
- . *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, U of California P, 1969.
- Charland, Maurice. "Technological Nationalism." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1986, pp. 196–220.
- . "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 73 no. 2, 1987, pp. 133–50.
- Dorland, Michael, and Maurice Charland. *Law, Rhetoric and Irony in the Formation of Canadian Civil Culture*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002.
- Garver, Eugene. "Truth in Politics: Ethical Argument, Ethical Knowledge, and Ethical Truth." In *For the Sake of Argument*. Chicago, U of Chicago P, 2004, pp. 13–43.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Second Edition. Notre Dame, IN, U of Notre Dame P, 1984.
- McGee, Michael C. "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 61, no. 3, 1975, pp. 235–49.