

What Rhetoric Tells us about Ourselves : Parallels and Crossroads

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Personal identity is at the heart of any research enterprise, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Often unconsciously, through our research, we speak about ourselves; we are defined by the projects we lead. Our choices, directions, and positions bear witness, in one way or another, to our sensitivities, but also to the unique experiences we have as researchers. Indeed, because it is led by real people of flesh and blood, research activity cannot be neutral—even if it aspires to objectivity. Our identities, which are always multiple and moving, cut across and guide our work of research and analysis. In turn, this work nourishes, sculpts, enriches, and sometimes upsets our identities. There is something incredibly dynamic and exciting about this process.

An Intellectual Journey

When, for the purposes of this issue of *Rhetor*, I began to question the relationship between my (assuredly plural) identities and my work on rhetoric, I immediately thought of the intellectual journey of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. This journey is relevant for two reasons.

First of all, it is relevant because these two Belgian thinkers—and, more broadly, the tradition to which they belong (Nicolas 2015a)—profoundly shape my identity as a researcher. Their works, ideas, and intuitions have gradually shaped my conception of the art of persuasion. They helped me to define and circumscribe the “realm” of this art (Perelman 1982 [1977]) and to give body to the positions that I defend today. My positions are humanistic (Nicolas 2015b), that is to say, above all, anti-Platonic or anti-dogmatic. For me, rhetoric is the only tool available to make responsible decisions in a complex, open, and unclear world. This tool allows us to exercise our political freedom with the risks that this entails. It is addressed to all citizens, without any distinction of fortune or profession. That is why I attach great importance to the teaching of rhetorical practice from an early age. In any case, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s place in my research is considerable. Their proposals helped me to structure and affirm my intellectual identity. They have enlightened or guided the direction of my research, but also some of my political convictions. In other words, I built myself, my positions with them—and sometimes against them. Their work had a revealing function for me. That said, I do not at all see myself as their disciple. The letter of their work often inspires me much less than its spirit. This spirit is, in my opinion, indispensable for confronting in conscience and freedom the dark moments in which we live.

Second of all, this journey is also relevant because of the scientific identity of the two authors of *The New Rhetoric* (1969 [1958]). Olbrechts-Tyteca and Perelman were by no means predisposed to take the path that they would eventually follow. The latter testified to this in numerous letters

kept in the Archives of the Free University of Brussels (Nicolas 2016f). Initially, their impression of rhetoric as a cultural object was of something incongruous and confusing. Let us recall what Olbrechts-Tyteca wrote in her autobiographical article of 1963 about their encounter with rhetoric:

A philosopher and a logician, Perelman had devoted the best of his activity to formal logic and analytical philosophy. As for me, I had a background based on the social sciences, economics, fairly good notions of psychology and I had practiced statistical research.

And the author continues:

If I insist on who we were, it is because it sometimes seems to me important to remember to myself that we were neither classical philologists nor historians nor literary critics and that our enthusiasm could not at any time be that of a specialist happy to broaden the scope of his discipline. Let us say that rhetoric was by no means dear to us, neither by craft nor by taste.

This narrative is very interesting because it highlights the initial gap between researchers and their object of study (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1963, 3).

Against the Current

Nevertheless, it is to this discipline that they turn to become what we know: two major figures in the refounding of rhetoric and argumentation in Europe. In any case, their approach is carried out in spite of and probably even against their primary identities, against their respective academic formations, their personal interests, and their inclinations. Let us therefore try to explain this encounter elsewhere and to go beyond the initial incongruity that Olbrechts-Tyteca mentions. In fact, the link to rhetoric emerged indirectly—through the authors' desire to better understand how we reason and how we make judgements in everyday life. For them, it is, first of all, a matter of studying the functioning of practical rationality, especially when values and norms are at stake.

The Belgian thinkers refuse to condemn as irrational that which cannot be formalized in terms of classical logic. They also refuse the violence of binding statements in the face of which people have only to remain silent. Hence, it is through this critical work that the rhetorical tradition opens itself up to them. Indeed, it alone enables a true sense of justice, justification, complexity, discussion, and criticism to be developed. This is what Olbrechts-Tyteca explains: “To be connected with the rhetorical tradition is not merely to justify a whole research project. It is also to take on, at least temporarily, certain aspects. One of the most important is the notion of audience, and its corollary notions of support and agreement” (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1963, 11).

Let us understand their path: after the disastrous Second World War, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca became aware of the impracticability and the immense dangers that came with too narrow a conception of rationality. It is in order to respond to this awareness that they began looking for techniques and practices that can help citizens exercise their argumentative reason. For these Belgian authors, it was a matter of giving each woman and each man effective tools to defend choices, opinions and convictions in the contingent world of human affairs. This quest led Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca down the path of persuasion. This requires putting in place tools but above all giving value to the audience whose support we hope to win and rally to our side.

Rhetoric as a Toolkit

Long abandoned and despised by philosophers, the tools they discovered are those of the rhetorical tradition. These tools are indispensable to allow democrats to move forward in uncertain conditions, where opinions and ideas can meet and clash. Perelman writes in this regard that no one should be satisfied with “the decision of others to justify their own convictions,” nor should he “dismiss the thought of any man as *a priori* unworthy of examination” (Perelman 1950, 38-39). The conference he gave on 8

October 1949 for the academic year of the Free University of Brussels bore witness to an imperative desire to revoke the “fascist maxim: ‘Believe, Obey, Fight,’” and to replace it with the motto of “free inquiry,” namely: “Doubt, decide and convince” (Perelman, 2009 [1949], 146).

The notion of “free inquiry” and the attention paid to the difficulties of its exercise in everyday life are crucial to Perelman’s identity (Nicolas 2016e, 2016f). Indeed, the Belgian thinker is not unaware that “it is often easier to obey than to decide oneself.” He also knows that it is also easier “to fight an adversary than to convince him” (Perelman, 2009 [1949], 146). As a Jew who had to flee from Poland and anti-Semitic persecutions, as a Resistance activist who had known the horrors of Nazism in Belgium, as a lawyer and a human rights campaigner, Perelman was not unaware of what men are capable of—and neither was his colleague Olbrechts-Tyteca. That is why they considered it essential to transmit to all men the ancestral methods of rhetoric. Both were aware that it is precisely the “contempt for rhetoric [and] the forgetting of the theory of argument, that have led to the negation of practical reason,” and which led in one way or another to war and contempt for others (Perelman, 2002 [1977], 24).

From Revelation to Revelation

Now, let’s go back to my personal journey. Rhetoric, as I have practiced it for ten years, was not readily apparent to me: it was not a given. When I began my studies in discourse and language in the broad sense, rhetoric was for me exclusively the art of speaking well. As a young Frenchman at the turn of the twenty-first century, I saw it above all as a practice of style and as a catalogue of figures. As such, I had nothing against rhetoric. Indeed, I thought it was important and somewhat fascinating to know how to handle words wisely and speak elegantly.

In short, my education—not very original in this respect—taught me, on the one hand, not to hold rhetoric in high scientific esteem, and on the other hand, to pay attention to beautiful speech (especially written) and beautiful language. In the early 2000s, a part of my identity reflected this contradiction, which structured the minds of my contemporaries. A meeting at the Sorbonne with Professor Delphine Denis, as well as parallel studies in political science, gave me the chance to consider things in a different way. I understood then that rhetoric is undoubtedly less an art of speaking than an art of persuading. This was my first revelation. However, at the time, it was not easy to pursue this new research interest. Indeed, in French academia, rhetoric is not a discipline in its own right. It is therefore impossible to specialize in it. In France, since the end of the nineteenth century, rhetoric—which is considered unnecessary, elitist and reactionary—is no longer part of shared knowledge. It is not taught in secondary or higher education, or only marginally. Successive reforms have replaced rhetoric with different subjects: for example, literary history or essay-writing (Nicolas 2016d). Of course, all in written form—since oral communication has a bad reputation. “War on rhetoric and peace with syntax,” wrote Victor Hugo in a well-known poem of the *Contemplations* (1856). It must be recognized that in today’s France things have not changed much (Nicolas 2016a).

After some work done in France on ethical proof and the *doxa* (Nicolas 2007), I had to face up to the lack of interest in France in this subject, and to find another homeland for my research. Without really knowing why, I felt at the time irresistibly attracted by rhetoric. The prospects it opened seem to me considerable. Several questions preoccupied me: Why is rhetoric so badly considered today? Why has France waged such a violent campaign against it? Why has rhetoric been put to death in most of Europe? It was, therefore, first of all, the history of this cultural object that interested me, and more precisely the history of its discredit. I happened upon a home in Belgium, in Brussels, in a laboratory of “textual linguistics and cognitive pragmatics.” This laboratory was interested, among many other themes, in the rhetorical genres and the question of proofs. The approach

followed by the team's researchers seemed to me both open and bold. I was immediately seduced. I then worked with Emmanuelle Danblon, who directed my doctoral thesis (Nicolas 2016g), and who was very aware of Perelman's work—his articles, his works and his correspondence. This was my second revelation. With Perelman, I had the impression of an accomplishment or reconfiguration of my identity and my strongest intuitions. In order to pursue these, I then undertook to conduct the same intellectual journey that he himself undertook with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca more than fifty years ago.

Rhetoric as a Cultural Crossroads

During this journey, I came to understand why rhetoric is not literature, nor a pure practice of beautiful style, nor philosophy, nor logic, nor linguistics, nor philology, nor law. In fact, it is all these at once, for the old *techne* is aimed first at the complete person, namely the citizen who seeks, through the use of the logos, to exercise political freedom. Rhetoric is a tool, and more importantly, a series of tools that must be learned to move forward in this liberating way. This is why we cannot imprison this *techne* in the shackles of a single discipline. Rhetoric is at the crossroads: of genres, intellectual traditions and disciplines. It creates links and helps to transgress borders of all kinds (Nicolas 2016b, 2016c). It combines arts and sciences, theory and practice, reason and emotions, self and others, the particular and the universal, letter and spirit, strength and weakness, uncertainty and decision.

Since then, I have become a Belgian and am trying, with enthusiasm, to transmit this bond while remaining French. In fact, I see myself as a smuggler, a traveler, an errant intellectual; that is to say, first of all, as a sophist (Nicolas 2016g).

“Beyond the primary tasks of the schoolmaster, the Sophists are the first representatives of professorship. And the education of man, as they put it into practice, rests on a science of man, of which they were undoubtedly the creators. For the reflection on nature, as practiced by the Hellenic ‘physicists,’ they substituted a science of culture, which is the science of man, because human reality is *par excellence* a cultural reality.” (Gusdorf 1963, 215)

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