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RHETORIC AND RATIONALITY

Titles can be very useful aids to invention. Take the title of this session: "The Rationality of Rhetoric/ The Rhetoric of Rationality." When I first read this, the antimetabole struck me as being exactly right: the terms, "rationality" and "rhetoric," were balanced, as subject and object, on either side of the preposition, "of". And the first prepositional phrase ("the rationality of rhetoric") was balanced by its mirror opposite on the other side of the slash. Something about the tropology of this title -- about its reversal and balance, then -- seemed to express the relationship that I believe holds between these two terms.

Specifically, the reversal of the words, "rhetoric" and "rationality," suggested that each term plays the same role as the other, at least grammatically. And the balance of the same words and structure suggested that the two prepositional phrases were not only grammatically, but also conceptually, interrelated. This interrelationship didn't seem to be a matter of strict semantic equivalence (I couldn't simply substitute the one word for the other and have the phrase mean the same thing). Nor was it a matter of one term being superior to, or more real than, the other (both words take turns as the subject and object of the preposition). In short, the relationship didn't seem to be one of identity (the title doesn't read "rationality is rhetoric ... rhetoric is rationality"), nor one of reduction (again, the title isn't "rationality as rhetoric," etc.)

How rhetoric and rationality are interrelated is the subject of this paper. But before I go on to discuss this subject, I must make one confession and two statements of policy.

My confession: that everything so far said about the title of this session -- about how its reversal and balance implies a particular relationship between the key terms, etc. --presupposes, as you no doubt noticed, far more than it explains.

Which leads me to my first statement of policy: that before discussing the rationality-rhetoric relationship generally, I will again return to my earlier claims about the title of this session. Specifically, I plan to look at the structures shaping my claims, since it is in these structures that rationality and rhetoric coinhere and interact most freely.

And this brings me to my second policy statement: that this paper is partly a story leading to a conclusion and partly a plot proceeding from an argument. The reasons (or this, as I hope to show, are essential to my main point: namely, that narratives and arguments are interdependent; that narrative resolutions and argumentative conclusions necessarily inform and shape each other; and finally, that rationality and rhetoric, as general concepts, are adequate to each other by virtue of this interdependence.

II

Let me get the story rolling. Imagine four different people reading the title of this session. The first person is a quasi-platonist who believes that rhetoric is a "bad emanation" of rationality; that reason deals with the world in its unity exclusively; and that rhetoric, with its emphasis on difference, conflict, and action is a kind of ersatz reason. Imagine this person reading the same words, the same antimetabole as you and I have. The first prepositional phrase raises in this person's mind the question -- "what is rational about rhetoric?" -- the answer to which is: "very little." The second phrase doesn't even register, since the question -- "what is rhetorical about rationality?" - doesn't make any sense. "Rationality" is the god-term here, and any interrogation of the god-term by an inferior one is blocked, or disqualified, as blasphemous. The slash of the title, then, demarcates a clear threshold between sense and nonsense, since only the first of two prepositional phrases can accommodate the basic premise here: that rhetoric can be reduced to a kind of flattery -- the form of rationality without its content.

Imagine a second person. One who believes that rhetoric and rationality, persuasion and conviction, action and thought, are essential to our humanity but

irreconcilable in our experience; that the world drives a wedge between each pair of concepts. Both prepositional phrases make perfect sense. But the slash marks a chasm, an unbridgeable gap that separates their truths. The antimetabole of the title, then, expresses the ideal (namely the balance and reciprocity of these concepts) while, at the same time, the slash (the point of balance between mirror phrases) blocks the desired integration of the two.

The third person is an utter skeptic. This person celebrates in the power of the mind to call everything -including the relationship between rationality and rhetoric -- into question. This negativity questions the adequacy of the trope, antimetabole, to express anything of value about human experience. Indeed, it calls into question the adequacy of language itself to express anything about reality. Here, the slash is the mark of illusion, since any claims of balance and reversal signal the masquerading of wishful thinking as knowledge and truth.

The fourth person believes much the same things as I do. Namely, that rationality and rhetoric, though not identical, and certainly not reducible to each other, are nonetheless intimately dependent on each other. For such a person, the antimetabole signals a balance and mirroring important to each; and the slash, the very point at which integration takes place.

Now for each person, the title "means" something different. Each has brought a different implicit structure to the antimetabole, and each would present a different conclusion -indeed, a different argument -- about the significance of the title, and more importantly, about the relationship between its key terms. To use a phrase borrowed from Hayden White via Kenneth Burke, the "master tropes" have determined the interpretations of, and arguments about, the title's antimetabole¹.

¹ As James M. Mellard points out in his book, Doing Tropology: Analysis of Narrative Discourse, "the most common tropologies today are either dyadic or tetradic," with Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan and Roman Jakobson falling into the first camp, and Peter Ramus, Giambattista Vico, Kenneth Burke and Hayden White falling into the second [1-2]. I decided to follow the tetradic model, not because of any ontological commitment -- the tropological world needn't divide into four master tropes any more than the physical world need divide into earth, air, fire. and water -- but for

The first master trope is metaphor. Metaphor enacts identification: the equation of the predicate subject with its object is asserted, undisturbed by any differences potentially disruptive of the identification. However, should another metaphor arise, one that challenges or undermines the first, the initial metaphor must contain, reduce, or diminish the intruder in order to protect its integrity and sacredness. This is what happened with our first person. He or she viewed the prepositional phrases as disruptive statements of identity -namely, "rhetoric is rationality/ rationality is rhetoric" -- and then proceeded to align "rhetoric" with mere appearance so that it could never be identified with the reality-term, "rationality."²

The second master trope is metonymy. Metonymy enacts separation and reduction. As in the phrase, "twenty hands" for twenty sailors, the whole is reduced to a part, and to this extent' the whole is separated from itself. The sailor is reduced to a function, separating the person as subject (with a whole life history, set of desires, interests, ambitions, etc.) from the person as object (mechanism on board the ship). The second person's viewpoint, then, is metonymic: rhetoric and rationality may belong together, but the two can never overcome their separateness, and our desire for their union can never be satisfied.

The third master trope (and here I'm departing from White's and Burke's order) is irony. Irony enacts negation, and is trans-tropological because it can call into question, or negate, any other trope. A doubtful tone of voice, or the right context, can undermine the statement of identity in "Juliet is the sun" or the reduction in "my friend is all thumbs." Irony can even call into question the adequacy of negation, creating a kind of mise en abyme in which even doubt is doubted. The ironic consciousness, then, views

pedagogical reasons. A fourfold division frustrates the pull towards facile polarity while allowing for maximal comprehensible difference, something required to illustrate my argument, but rendered impossible by discussions of twelve or fifty or a hundred master tropes.

². For Hayden White's discussion of the master tropes, see Metahistory, "Explanation by Emplotment," pages 7-11.

the reversal and balance of antimetabole -- and any claims about the relation of rationality to rhetoric -- as a delusion, as wish-fulfillment.

The fourth master trope is synecdoche. Synecdoche enacts integration. In the statement, "he is all heart," the person is not being reduced to a bodily organ, nor strictly being identified. Instead, the qualities of the person are integrated with the qualities associated with the heart. What the one embodies, then, is brought together with what is embodied by the other: a testament to the ultimate adequacy of the two to coinhere.

Clearly each master trope represents a different enactment, a different way of organizing the world, and in particular, a different relationship between rationality and rhetoric. Each brings what Michael Polanyi has called "tacit," or "personal," knowledge to the antimetabole of the title, and each constructs a different kind of focal knowledge, namely a different interpretation of, and argument from, the same series of words³. For one person, then, the slash separates sense from nonsense, for another, it marks a chasm, an irreversible separation between the key terms; for another, it marks self-delusion; for yet another, the possibility of integration.

Each enactment involves a different action moving towards a different kind of resolution. I've talked about acts of identification, reduction, negation, integration. To talk about the interaction -- and reaction -- of these master tropes as they encounter each other, I now look to a narrative paradigm, and especially the modulation of genres. For as I hope to show, narrative kinds use the enactments of the master tropes as ways of ignoring, separating, overturning, and incorporating the elements of other stories. In short, generic modulation of narratives might well be the tacit structures determining not only what conclusions people derive, but also what processes of argumentation they use

³. For a collection of essays, articles, and lectures by Michael Polanyi on personal knowledge, metaphor, poetry, art, myth, religion and other topics, see Meaning, edited by Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch.

with what audience⁴. Seen this way, rationality could be defined as the integration of tacit and focal structures; and rhetoric, as the study of this integration.

The complexities of generic modulation prevent my enumerating more than just one set of examples, taken, once again, from my story about the four people and the title of this session.

Suppose we look at our eiron, that third person who championed the power of negativity. His basic narrative strategy is satire and parody. In talking to the first person - namely, the platonist -- the satirist finds himself becoming impatient: the platonist strikes him as naive, oversimplistic, romantic (in the sense of being romance-oriented), too deferential to the notion of rationality to achieve the complexities of doubt and reflection that the eiron values so highly. A slight exaggeration of these tendencies -- which might take any form, ranging from parody to invective -- and the satirist turns the romance on its head.

In talking with the other two people, he does much the same. The tragic view of the second person (that important aspects of reality -- here, rationality and rhetoric - cannot be reconciled) and the comic view of the fourth person (that reconciliation and integration are possible) are called into question by all the strategies of negation open to the satirist. The resulting satire would show that loss and separation cannot be sources of real revelation about the human condition, nor that reconciliation ultimately can triumph in a human community.

Suppose we now look at the satirist from the perspectives of the other people. How might their narratives modulate the satirist's negativity and turn it towards their own ends, towards their own resolutions?

The guiding narrative of the first person is romance. One of the distinguishing features of romance is its self-sufficiency: it creates a world not immediately affected by events and considerations outside itself. Melodrama is one particular form of

⁴. A recent book by Walter R. Fisher, Human Communication as Narration: Towards a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action (1987) outlines "a new logic, one appropriate to his basic conception of human communication as narration [ix]." Of special interest to this paper is Part III, "Narrative Rationality, Good Reasons, and Audiences."

romance. In it, the division of its world into hero, victim, and villain is adequate to explaining experience. The divisions themselves are usually quite clear: the hero and the villain are quite distinguishable, and the resolution, either in the melodrama of triumph or defeat, is straightforward.

How might the melodramatist deal with satiric negativity? On the one hand, the melodramatist might encourage a satiric attack on the second prepositional phrase - "the rhetoric of rationality" -- since the satirist seeks to undermine the very notion that the melodramatist, too, rejects: that rhetoric can explain or complement the notion of rationality. In this case, the melodramatist might cast the satirist as a hero, as someone who rescues the god-term from the hands of blasphemers. On the other hand, any attack on the notion of rationality -- is another matter. Under these circumstances, the melodramatist will probably cast the satirist in the only negative role available to him: namely, as the villain. Once cast as a villain, the satirist becomes a character in the melodramatist's story. The satirist is thus contained, his negativity functioning only as the obstacle for the hero to surmount.

Again, tragic and comic narratives have their own ways of dealing with the satiric impulse. From the tragic perspective, the negativity of satire is good if it exposes any false integration, any facile reconciliation of people or forces (in this case, of rationality with rhetoric). The negativity of satire is bad, however, if it undermines the possibility of tragic enlightenment -- the knowledge or revelation that comes from accepting separation. Under these conditions, the tragic structure reduces the satirist to a failed tragic hero, one who retreats into the infinite postponement of skepticism, rather than embracing action and risk.

From the comic perspective, the negativity of satire also plays an important role. For a community to become integrated it must overcome its biases and limitations, members must question and doubt their own motives, must reflect upon their choices and actions. To the extent that doubt, questioning, reflection are all features of negation, the satirist plays an important role in securing the aims of comedy. But should negativity become a force in its own right, or challenge the very possibility of integration, then the satirist is cast as the malcontent, the outsider who refuses to join in the dance or attend

the wedding or whatever. Or to put it in the terms of this paper, the ironist excludes himself from whatever benefits derive from integrating rationality and rhetoric.

If these four people were to argue with each other, their tacit knowledge, or narratives, would determine the focus of their arguments. Argumentative strategies such as dismissal, discrimination, synthesis, follow from the general structures organizing the experience of each person. I suspect that many accusations of fallacious reasoning proceed from narrative antagonism and modulation. The satirist might interpret the clear cut categories of melodrama as oversimplistic, prompting a charge of excluding alternative possibilities. The comic, on the other hand, might point out that the satirist's act of negation affirms the very value of negation, and that, tu quoque, the satirist is inconsistent in his skepticism. Each uses a characteristic form of enactment, then to modify the enactments of the others.

To achieve this, rhetoric as a discipline needs to take a different view of itself. It needs to tell the story of invention, of how two kinds of knowledge - tacit and explicit - narrative and argumentative - work together to create a shared world. It needs to attend to adequacy, that is, to the ways in which the disciplines allow for rationality, but participate in them. Rhetoric needs, then, to re-examine the old concepts of the disciplines, not as a mirror image, but as a great divide. Rhetoric needs, in short, to find in its interpretation of, and argument about, the title of this volume a paradigm of its own adequacy as a discipline.

² The diachronic aspects of tacit knowledge need to be understood before any theory of habit or argumentative knowledge can be formulated. A good theory of the diachronic changes in genre is Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genre and Modes*, especially Chapter 9 to 12.

III

So what is the relationship between rhetoric and rationality? My answer to this is tied to my vision of what rhetoric can be as a discipline. Rhetoric can be the study of how tacit knowledge conditions focal knowledge; how tropes and narratives condition argumentation; how patterns of generic modulation, for instance, condition rationality, and in particular, the use of certain dialectical moves, such as accusations of fallacious reasoning. Rhetoric, too, could study the converse of these relationships: how argumentation, for instance, affects narrative structures; how the process of adding distinctions, refuting evidence, connecting data to claims adds subplots, modifies resolutions, alters generic expectations. Such a study could look at the diachronic development of genres -- their hybrids, their anti-types, and so on -- as paradigms of how tacit knowledge develops⁵. Rhetoric could integrate this study with its traditional interest in the conventions and structures of focal knowledge: premises and conclusions, the processes of controversy, the structures of rational preference.

To achieve this, rhetoric, as a discipline, needs to take a synecdochal, comic view of itself. It needs to tell the story of integration, of how two kinds of knowledge -- tacit and focal, narrative and argumentative -- when taken together, constitute rationality. It needs to assert its adequacy: that it not only studies the integrations that allow for rationality, but participates in them. Rhetoric needs, then, to re-examine the old controversies about rationality itself -- about whether it is rooted in the context of cultural meanings or in a critical faculty -- and view the slash, so to speak, separating these concepts as the line dividing mirror images rather than as a great divide. Rhetoric needs, in short, to find in its interpretation of, and argument about, the title of this session a paradigm of its own adequacy as a discipline.

⁵. The diachronic aspects of tacit knowledge need to be understood before any history of local, or argumentative, knowledge can be formulated. A good study of the diachronic changes in genres is Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of genres and Modes, especially Chapters 9 to 13.

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