

The Responsibility of Fools

At the risk of betraying my intellectual debt to dead white males, I must respond to the question of rhetorical responsibility by turning to Kenneth Burke's *Counterstatement*. If rhetoric does have a responsibility, it is to promote:

indolence, dissipation, vacillation, mockery, distrust, "hypochondria," non-conformity, bad sportsmanship, in short, negativism. Experimentalism, curiosity, risk, dislike of propaganda, dislike of certainty—tentative attitude towards all manners of thinking which reinforce the natural dogmatism of the body. (pp. 111-112).

And, what should rhetoric avoid? It should avoid falling into line with even the most appealing crusade. Rhetoric has a responsibility to avoid the promotion of:

efficiency, prosperity, material acquisitions, increased consumption, "new needs," expansion, higher standards of living, progressive rather than regressive evolution, in short, ubiquitous optimism. Enthusiasm, faith, evangelizing, Christian soldiering, power, energy, sales drives, undeviating certainties, confidence, cooperation, in short, flags and all the jungle vigor that goes with flags. (p. 111).

Aside from the pleasure we experience in rolling these phrases off the tongue, however, why would rhetoric put itself in such an unpopular position? (Lest we forget, I want to remind us not to downplay the importance of pleasure.) But, back to the main point—especially given the monumental environmental crisis we humans have perpetuated, does rhetoric not have a responsibility to persuade people to behave more reasonably, more rationally? Why should it seek to promote such negativity? Quite simply, to "reaffirm

democracy (government by interference, by distrust) over against Fascism (regulation by a 'benevolent' central authority)" (p. 119).

I realize that this Burkean perspective may encourage oversimplification. But I am far more concerned about irrelevance. I view environmental rhetoric as a problem-oriented discipline that impinges directly on human survival, and democracy as the suite of political practices most likely to enhance that survival (Cox, 2007).

Vibrant democracy requires recognition, and even appreciation, of difference- in beliefs, interests, and values; along with a recognition that open conflict over those differences is not only legitimate, but desirable (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 1993, 1996, 2000). From this perspective, our political goal should be to create a modicum of political unity through ongoing engagement in conflict, or what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) describe as a healthy dynamic between consensus and dissent.

A perspective that presumes no democracy without dissent privileges rhetorical strategies that are always partial, ambiguous, and tenuous; addressed to audiences that may ignore, deliberately misconstrue, or carefully examine the message (Ivie 2004, 2006; Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson 2005). This perspective promotes tolerance by directing attention toward the problem of how political participants "might transcend themselves sufficiently to observe their own foibles even while acting strategically toward one another—that

is, how they might act with maximum consciousness by rounding out their individual perspectives through verbal sparring” (Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson 2005, 765).

Like democracy, the natural world wherein we humans are organically grounded does not assume a state of perpetual stability and balance so much as a state of perpetual change and tension. We can read that tension in the resilience of organisms that evolved long before humans, and probably will observe our self-induced extinction. Rather than avoid change, they evolve ways to recover from the always present potential disaster.

Rhetoric should remind us that every political system carries multiple entailments, and none are universally desirable. The best democracy can do for us is surface hegemonic configurations that grow out of nepotism, corruption, and commercial pressures, and then offer space to renegotiate those configurations (Peterson, et al 2006). But if we accept a domesticated version of democracy, something that must be protected from non-domesticated argument, it offers nothing. Democracy without difference is irrelevant. Relevant democracy is troubling and inefficient and funny.

Although I agree with much of Steve Schwarze’s (2006) recent ode to melodrama, he sells comedy short when he claims it “seeks to reconcile conflict via compromise.” Much of melodrama’s aesthetic appeal comes from its comic frame. The sheer pleasure of cheering

the hero who unchains the heroine from the railroad track or hissing as the villain slinks off stage shakes us out of our post-9/11 silence.

To return to the beginning: If (and I emphasize my uncertainty here) environmental rhetoric has a responsibility, it is to play the fool: to care passionately without becoming evangelical, to promote laughter without becoming trivial, and to hold complexity without becoming irrelevant.

References

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