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978-1-107-00657-7 - Edmund Burke and the Art of Rhetoric

Paddy Bullard

Excerpt

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William Wordsworth finished his studies at Cambridge University in January 1791, and spent the next four months kicking his heels in London, ‘whirled about by the vortex of its *strenua inertia*’, as he wrote to a friend.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary letters and later memoirs we see him making his first contact with the radical dissenting circles that would welcome him as an active member in 1793 – but he keeps an eye on mainstream politics as well.<sup>2</sup> He pores over the ‘master pamphlets of the day’, and attends debates at the House of Commons.<sup>3</sup> One ‘tongue-favoured’ orator in particular sets his heart racing with excitement during a visit to the strangers’ gallery, as he later recalls in Book VII of *The Prelude*:

This is no trifler, no short-flighted wit,  
 No stammerer of a minute, painfully  
 Delivered, No! the Orator hath yoked  
 The Hours, like young Aurora, to his Car:  
 Thrice welcome Presence! how can patience e’er  
 Grow weary of attending on a track  
 That kindles with such glory! All are charmed,  
 Astonished; like a Hero in Romance,  
 He winds away his never-ending horn;  
 Words follow words, sense seems to follow sense;  
 What memory and what logic! till the Strain  
 Transcendent, superhuman as it seemed,  
 Grows tedious even in a young Man’s ear.<sup>4</sup>

Editorial tradition has it that this is a portrait of William Pitt the younger, probably on account of some earlier references Wordsworth makes to the familiarity of the Pitt family name. But the unnamed orator is far more likely to be Edmund Burke. Burke was admired and feared in almost equal measure for the brilliance and long-windedness of his parliamentary speeches, and the eulogistic apostrophe to the ‘Genius of Burke’ that Wordsworth inserts after this passage in his revisions of 1832 is framed as

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an apology for his satire of 1804.<sup>5</sup> But it is the details of Wordsworth's language here that confirm he has Burke in mind.

Wordsworth's lines resonate with little echoes from the master pamphlet of 1790, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Interestingly, it is Burke's satire on the rhetoric of the revolutionary radicals that seems to play most insistently through his memory. The poet's elusive image of the orator's speech as a 'track | That kindles with such glory' transfigures Burke's caricature of the leading radical Dr Richard Price, imagined warming himself up to deliver a political sermon: 'His enthusiasm kindles as he advances; and when he arrives at his peroration, it is in a full blaze.'<sup>6</sup> Burke the orator appears to Wordsworth as a marvellous 'Hero in Romance', a glowing personal presence that charms and astonishes. Earlier in *The Prelude* Wordsworth writes warmly of those endless 'Tales that charm away the wakeful night | In Araby, – romances, legends penned | For solace', so there is some reason to find temper in the satire here.<sup>7</sup> Except that Wordsworth's simile brings together romance and eloquence in a way that evokes another precedent from the *Reflections*. Burke makes the same connection in his attack on Jean-Jacques Rousseau as antecedent of the French Revolution (Wordsworth is thought to have been reading Rousseau, doubtless with enthusiasm, during 1791).<sup>8</sup> In the *Reflections* Burke alleges that Rousseau revealed to a mutual acquaintance how he set out to animate his own writings, if not exactly with 'fairies, and heroes of romance', then with 'that species of the marvellous, which might still be produced ... the marvellous in life, in manners, in characters, and in extraordinary situations, giving rise to new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals'.<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly, Wordsworth imagines Burke as at once hero and narrator of a new kind of political and moral romance, rather as Burke had cast Rousseau in the same double, and ultimately Quixotic, role.<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not these correspondences are coincidences, they can help us to place Edmund Burke – and, more particularly, Edmund Burke the rhetorician – in a larger literary and intellectual landscape than he usually occupies. Either by means of serendipity or of very intelligent instinct, Wordsworth's recollections of Parliament in the spring of 1791 touch upon a quality that is essential to Burke's art of rhetoric. The impression received by the poet is that of having encountered a 'species of the marvellous' in human form, a person who is marked out even among his fellow parliamentarians by his extraordinary accomplishment as a speaker. And yet Burke is not proud: he seems somehow innocent of his distinction. In his way, the orator is one of that select Wordsworthian

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company engaged in a work of love, ‘Who care not, know not, think not what they do’.<sup>11</sup> The poet is impressed enough by the orator’s inartificial proofs (‘What memory’), struggles to follow his reasoning (‘what logic!’), and feels moved by his emotional appeals (‘charmed, | Astonished’). But without doubt it is the character of the orator, his ethos, that strikes home. Wordsworth hardly notices whether the orator has managed to move the audience, or to win its assent through reasoned argument. The presence of the speaker, his talent and capacity as manifested by sheer personal charisma, are all his concern. In short, the rhetoric that Wordsworth witnesses is a rhetoric of character.

My business in the following pages is to explain how the combination of these two terms, ‘rhetoric’ and ‘character’, can help us describe the function and the beauty of Burke’s writings. Burke is acknowledged to have been the most eloquent writer and speaker of his age, even by doubters like the young Wordsworth. His accomplishment both as a literary artist and as a political thinker is linked at the deepest level with contemporary conceptions of what it means to deliberate well in matters of state. This book is the first full-length study to give an account of these links: it proposes a theory of Burke’s rhetoric. While outlining this theory I want to keep the term ‘rhetoric’ available for use in a relatively informal way, to denote various qualities of artfulness, dynamism and spontaneity in Burke’s published works. These qualities were associated by Burke’s contemporaries with his skill as a parliamentary speaker, and have been analysed ever since according to the systems of eloquence developed by theorists of the art in fourth-century Athens, first-century Rome and early modern Europe. A problem here is that the classical and humanist tradition of rhetoric, which seems indispensable as a contextual source for Burke’s art, is systematic to its core. Rhetoric’s claims to the dignity of being an art, rather than a mere knack, depend upon the rational way it accounts for all those persuasive irregularities of expression that lift language above grammar. But a systematic description of Burke’s writings and speeches is quite inappropriate to the expansive and associative way in which he worked. Rhetoric is a system, but Burke is not a systematic thinker. The very idea of ‘Burkean rhetoric’ implies an awkward methodological contradiction: I shall try to plot a way through that contradiction in a moment.

It is no coincidence (as we shall see in this book’s first chapter) that the ‘character’ component of Burke’s ‘rhetoric of character’ poses similar problems. ‘Character’ is a descriptive word, referring to the general impression given by the manners, habits, social status and moral qualities

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of persons (or collections of persons). But to give the ‘character’ of a person is not only to describe – it is to evaluate morally. Even during the early eighteenth century, when the descriptive sense of the word ‘character’ predominated in common usage, having no character at all was a bad thing.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, those with too much character risked being satirized in Theophrastan caricature, or captured by stage typology. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the evaluative senses of ‘character’ took over, and they became positive, often in a strenuous sort of way. ‘Character’ came to stand for qualities of moral strength, perseverance, dutifulness, uprightness, and so on: this is the ‘elevation of character’ that Samuel Smiles, in *Self-Help* (1859), would present as the precondition and the end of getting on.<sup>13</sup> When John Stuart Mill denounced this sort of ‘pinched and hidebound type of human character’ in *On Liberty* (1859), critics responded by attacking his own vision of progressive human individuality as a system of enfeebling selfishness, quite incompatible with the prerogatives of social duty.<sup>14</sup> Burke’s use of the term ‘character’ is rooted, as we shall see, in an early modern literary way of writing about human personalities that can seem strange to twenty-first-century sensibilities. It is defined by the early modern assurance that something definitive can be said about someone’s morality and disposition in the space of a few paragraphs or sentences, or even within the compass of a well-turned paradox – that the complexity of human personality is somehow best served by extreme economy of description. But Burke also expends a great deal of rhetorical energy on presenting himself as something rather like a prototypical Smilesian hero: as unbendingly and unselfishly industrious, as a striving and dutiful new man. What removes Burke so far from the world of the mid-Victorian Liberals, of course, is his conception of his own vigorous character as a necessary, if minor supplement to the public characters of the land-owning, aristocratic ruling classes – characters that he values precisely because they are ‘sluggish, inert and timid’ in their dominance, and therefore capable of representing the settled property of the nation.<sup>15</sup>

It is this conception that Burke has of his own public character as being at once expressive of personality, and meaningful only in the context of other, rather different kinds of character, that is so crucial to his rhetoric. If rhetoric is the art of finding the means of persuasion best suited to any given argument, Burke believes that the most truly political way to those means is through the display of one’s own good political character, the rhetoric of ethos. And this rhetorical ideal feeds back into Burke’s idea of good political character. It is manifested above all in a statesman’s real

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knowledge of (or capacity to represent in some other way) the characters of those to whom (and of whom, and for whom) he speaks. The ethical principles here involve at once a theory about effective deliberation, a mechanism for political representation, and a vision of good government. Because these functions are inseparable in Burke's writings and speeches, the proper study of his rhetoric must focus on the terms of its referential purpose. To put it another way, the subject of his rhetoric (who is addressing whom, on behalf of whom?) is the pressing problem, to which the object of his rhetoric (argumentative persuasion) is subordinate.<sup>16</sup> We can begin to unfold this principle of Burke's rhetoric of character by looking at a few of his very rare direct statements about the nature of political eloquence.

## MAKING DISCOURSE ETHICAL

Burke left behind only a very few direct comments on the art of political rhetoric. Perhaps his most revealing remark on the subject is preserved by James Boswell in the *Life of Johnson* (1789), a book that Burke himself enjoyed but rather disapproved of.<sup>17</sup> Boswell records a conversation at The Club led by Burke and Richard Brinsley Sheridan from 1778, two years before the start of the latter's parliamentary career. Sheridan had an envious interest in Burke's published speeches, and on this occasion he wondered (repeating a favourite observation of Oliver Goldsmith) what posterity would make of those speeches having been made so well, though 'not one vote would be gained by it'.<sup>18</sup> Burke replied candidly

that it is very well worth while for a man to take pains to speak well in Parliament. A man, who has vanity, speaks to display his talents; and if a man speaks well, he gradually establishes a certain reputation and consequence in general opinion, which sooner or later will have its political reward. Besides, though not one vote is gained, a good speech has its effect. Though an act which has been ably opposed passes into a law, yet in its progress it is modelled, it is softened in such a manner, that we see plainly the Minister has been told, that the Members attached to him are so sensible of its injustice or absurdity from what they have heard, that it must be altered . . . There are many honest well-meaning country gentlemen who are in parliament only to keep up the consequence of their families. Upon most of these a good speech will have influence.<sup>19</sup>

Boswell captures a characteristic note in Burke's voice here, a touch of bitterness held back behind the tone of reasonable pragmatism. Eloquence is merely a consolation for the lack of influence, and flourishes in the absence of real power. Burke writes something similar eight years earlier in

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*Thoughts on the Present Discontents* (1770) while lamenting the decline of independent MPs in the House of Commons. For a non-partisan country gentleman, ruining himself to get elected and then losing influence among the parliamentary placemen is bad enough. But ‘if he has not the talent of elocution’, reckons Burke, ‘which is the case of many as wise and knowing men as any in the House, he is liable to all these inconveniencies, without the éclat which attends upon any tolerably successful exertion of eloquence. Can we conceive a more discouraging post of duty than this?’<sup>20</sup>

The striking thing in both passages is the easiness with which Burke allows Parliament to be largely dysfunctional as a deliberative institution, or even as a bulwark between equity and the ‘injustice and absurdity’ of ministers. These are large concessions to the cynicism of his non-parliamentary friends, and they are made for a particular rhetorical effect. They allow Burke to place a particular emphasis on the ethical function of parliamentary eloquence. The éclat of a ‘tolerably successful’ speech is enough to make good an opposition politician’s entanglement with the whole system of parliamentary obstruction. It is as though the jobbery of Lord North’s ministry and the dullness of the country gentlemen exist solely as a foil for the brilliance of the opposition talents.<sup>21</sup> Burke proposes that the only honest redress for MPs, and the most likely chance (small as it is) of averting a constant round of legislative catastrophe, is through the display of extraordinary eloquence. Mere good counsel is not enough – the speaker must make an impact, and the energy for that comes from self-directed motives.<sup>22</sup> The appetite for gaining ‘a certain reputation and consequence in general opinion’ is one; simple ‘vanity’ is another. Burke names the vice self-deprecatingly, and perhaps it is magnanimity that he really has in mind, the ‘wild stock of pride’ as he would later call it, referring to his friend Admiral Keppel, ‘on which the tenderest of all hearts graft[s] the milder virtues’.<sup>23</sup> Winning the honourable character of an orator is a sufficient motive for undertaking the labours of parliamentary business. Correspondingly, the persuadable part of the Commons, the independent members, are there to keep up characters of their own. It is on this mutual ground for the estimation and assertion of character, this ethical medium, that good speaking can have a real political effect, says Burke – where it has any effect at all.

Another of Burke’s rare moments of rhetorical self-reflection occurs in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. It is found in a passage of self-vindication from the charges of inconsistency that he faced in 1790 after his change of position from conciliator of the American revolutionaries to

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opponent of the French revolutionaries. Burke defends himself by describing the difference between the emphatic rhetorical mode in which he writes and the kind of 'academic' discourse in which all possible considerations of a question must be weighed equally. 'A man who, among various objects of his equal regard, is secure of some, and full of anxiety for the fate of others', Burke writes,

... is apt to go to much greater lengths in his preference of the objects of immediate solicitude than Mr. Burke has ever done. A man so circumstanced often seems to undervalue, to vilify, almost to reprobate and disown, those that are out of danger. This is the voice of nature and truth, and not of inconsistency and false pretence.<sup>24</sup>

Burke describes how the speaker depends on the generosity of the audience to distinguish his general good intentions (which can only be taken on trust) from the exigencies of his argument. His point here is about the need for freedom, weight and energy in argument, and the peculiar relationships of trust that these qualities require. He is also making a claim about his own political character. Evidently Burke has none of the ballast of wealth or rank that his contemporaries recognize as legitimate tokens of authority. But the very fact of his participation in legislative debate – the fact that he is a speaker in Parliament, not merely a silent voter or backstairs bureaucrat – implies a concession on the part of those who do have this sort of authority that Burke speaks, at very least, with the weight of an honourable character. So long as the audience attends to Burke's 'reputation and consequence' as an orator, that audience has no reason to expect that Burke will make comprehensive, balanced, 'academic' arguments, rather than personal, partial and moral ones. It can require no tribute of reticence or deference from him. Neither does it have the right to charge him with hypocrisy or inconsistency when his polemics fall short of academic completeness and metaphysical truth. To whatever extent it is ethical, his oratory must necessarily be partial.

It is the relationship between the characters of speaker and audience that Burke takes as his fundamental concern in each of these remarks about rhetoric. The external objects of discourse (persuasive argument, or informative communication) are of secondary importance: the subjective part of discourse, the reputation of the speaker and the opinion of the persons to whom he is speaking, are what capture his attention. Burke may not be a systematic thinker, but the remarks show that he was in the habit of thinking critically about how character functions in rhetoric. We see this in the carefulness of his ethical discriminations. In the passage

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from Boswell's *Life* where he is talking about the parliamentary reception of oratory, Burke's immediate instinct is to distinguish between the audience broadly conceived (which confers 'a certain reputation and consequence in general opinion') and the part of the audience that is actually receptive to his rhetoric (the 'honest well-meaning country gentlemen'). The audience broadly conceived may be the body of the House of Commons, or the wider readership of his printed speeches. But both are distinct from the particular audience whose character it is to be persuaded by good speeches.<sup>25</sup> What interests Burke is the complex involvement of one kind of audience with another. The persuadability of the receptive part of the audience itself depends on the speaker attaining a 'reputation and consequence in general opinion' that only the general audience can confer. Burke's casual analysis of voting patterns in the Commons looks rather unsophisticated by the standards of modern empirical historiography, perhaps. But it shows that what he sacrificed in accuracy was made up for in the critical intelligence of his thought about political audiences.

There is consistency among these scattered remarks on eloquence, and, as we shall see, they correspond with certain rhetorical practices and preoccupations that recur throughout Burke's writings and speeches. When Burke thinks about the art of persuasion his instinct is to cut through all the peripheral questions of style, delivery and political culture that occupied his rhetorically minded contemporaries, and to go to the core of the art. Burke's interest is in the business of persuasion and proof – what Aristotle calls *pistis*, a term signifying both the state of conviction that occurs when somebody accepts an argument, and the process that brings about that state of assent.<sup>26</sup> According to Aristotle's description, the arguments of working politicians are likely to combine external proofs (statistics, information, legal precedents) with artistic proofs, such as rational argumentation (*logos*) and appeals to the audience's emotions (*pathos*). But it is a third kind of artistic proof – proof by means of establishing the character and credibility of a speaker (*ethos*) – that Burke takes as the organizing principle for the kind of political arguments he makes.

We do not know whether Burke ever read Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but his comments agree with the Aristotelian dictum that moral character constitutes the most effective means of proof, and that *ethos* is the principle to which the other kinds of proof must refer.<sup>27</sup> The 'body' of rhetorical proof, according to Aristotle, is built up from logical arguments based on general maxims and common beliefs, or 'enthymemes'. But the problem



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with logical arguments is that their persuasiveness does not increase in proportion with their logicity. In the rough and tumble of civic dispute there is no correlation between a speaker's cogency and the effectiveness of their discourse. On the contrary, the most persuasive speakers do not use enthymemes when they move or reassure their audience.<sup>28</sup> Proofs based on the character of the speaker, however, are more persuasive the more ethical they are made: 'for we feel confidence in a greater degree', says Aristotle, 'and more readily in persons of worth in regard to everything in general, but where there is no certainty and there is room for doubt, our confidence is absolute'.<sup>29</sup> In a different sense, the ability of speakers to persuade by pathos is determined by their knowledge of ethos, because the emotions are rooted in that irrational part of the soul that everyone understands in terms of moral character: 'when describing a man's moral character we do not say that he is wise or intelligent, but gentle and temperate; but a wise man also is praised for his disposition, and praiseworthy dispositions we term virtues'.<sup>30</sup> The catalogue of emotions in the second book of the *Rhetoric*, which Aristotle provides as a guide to the passional dispositions found in all audiences, is presented as a counterpart to and extension of his account of ethos.<sup>31</sup>

For Burke, who tends to identify serious parliamentary eloquence with oppositional politics, winning the reputation of eloquence provides consolation for those who lack real power, and keeps alive the promise of a deferred 'political reward'. More importantly, it puts the speaker into a sphere of trust that allows him to make more emphatically rhetorical speeches, safe in the knowledge that his audience will grant him latitude to weigh the most pressing aspects of any given question. For 'if by a fair, by an indulgent, by a gentlemanly behaviour to our representatives', Burke warns, 'we do not give confidence to their minds, and a liberal scope to their understandings; if we do not permit our members to act on a *very* enlarged view of things; we shall at length infallibly degrade our national representation into a confused and scuffling bustle of local agency'.<sup>32</sup> A well-established ethos gives a speaker licence to be urgent, to abjure false delicacy, and to resist neutrality, and it allows him to do all this without renouncing the claims of equity. There is a point in the *Reflections* when Burke has a moment of self-consciousness about his reckless veneration of aristocracy, and he turns on the reader to reaffirm this ethical function in his writing:

I do not, my dear Sir, conceive you to be of that sophistical, captious spirit, or of that uncandid dulness, as to require, for every general observation or sentiment, an explicit detail of the correctives and exceptions which reason will presume to

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be included in all the general propositions which come from reasonable men. You do not imagine that I wish to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles. No, Sir. There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive.<sup>33</sup>

The tone here is coercive, although Burke is appealing once again to the special latitude of political discourse. The pun of ‘reason’ against ‘reasonable’, a favourite of Burke’s, shows a touch of Augustan wit.<sup>34</sup> It provides the vehicle for his most characteristic argument about political discourse: that at moments of crisis the habits and instincts of ‘reasonable men’ are more reliable guides for action than the control (the ‘correctives and exceptions’) of purely rational deliberation. Character supersedes ratiocination, dispositional reasonableness precedes the act of reasoning, ethos takes priority over logos. In so far as Burke thinks technically about rhetoric, this is his artistic principle: to secure as firm a bond as possible of common sense and shared reasonableness between artist and audience, so that the greatest latitude of thought and expression can be taken by the speaker without breaking the faith of the listener. The eccentric energy of the argument is balanced against the ethical ballast of the readership. Burke’s art of rhetoric is an art of moral equipoise.

The orientation of Burke’s rhetoric towards ethos obliges us to go beyond the common conception of the art as an instrument of persuasion. In Burke’s hands, rhetoric is both something less and something more than a technology for interfering with the convictions of others. It is his theory of government that indicates the most appropriate way of understanding the sorts of comprehensive strategies we find in Burke’s writings and speeches. From the very start of his political career Burke argues that it is the first duty of all legislators to attune themselves to the character and disposition of the political nation for whom they legislate. His experience of American colonial politics – his early realization that it would always be impossible to compel or impose upon the Americans – is the defining one here. ‘People must be governed in a manner agreeable to their temper and disposition’, he writes in *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* (1769), his first major pamphlet, ‘and men of free character and spirit must be ruled with, at least, some condescension to this spirit and this character.’<sup>35</sup> ‘The temper and character which prevail in our Colonies’, he reiterates in his *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775), ‘are, I am afraid, unalterable by any human art. We cannot . . . persuade them that they are not sprung from a nation, in whose veins the blood of freedom circulates. The language in which they would hear you tell them this tale, would detect the imposition; your speech would betray you.’<sup>36</sup>