Rhetoric and Its Situations

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In "The Rhetorical Situation" Lloyd Bitzer argues that the objective rhetorical situation dominates the rhetorical act. Indeed, "so controlling is situation," he argues, "that we should consider it the very ground of rhetorical activity. . . ."[1] Bitzer claims first that the rhetorical situation is empirically *determinate*, consisting of an objectively recognizable "exigence" or urgent problem potentially modifiable through persuasive discourse; and a "complex" consisting of "audience" and "constraints." "The exigence and the complex . . . which generate rhetorical discourse," he claims, "are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historical facts in the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them."[2] Second, Bitzer argues that the rhetorical situation is a *determining* situation, in that it controls the response of the rhetor who enters it. Thus the rhetorical situation does not invite just any response, but invites a fitting response, for "If it makes sense to say that situation invites a 'fitting' response, then situation must somehow prescribe the response which fits."[3] For Bitzer the rhetor's response is predetermined by the positive facts in the objective situation; and the rhetor who does not act appropriately has, metaphorically, failed to "read the prescription accurately."[4]

In "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation" Richard Vatz counters Bitzer's thesis by emphasizing the creative role of the rhetor. For Vatz, the rhetorical situation is *non-determinate* in itself, for "no situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it."[5] In itself the situation is ambiguous and indeterminate, what William James may have called a "buzzing, blooming confusion." Second, Vatz claims that the rhetorical situation, rather than determining the proper response of the rhetor, is itself *determined by* the rhetor. The rhetor is a com-

pletely free agent who creates the very reality of the rhetorical situation, for "the very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration."[6] The rhetor translates "the chosen information into meaning," meaning being a "consequence of rhetorical creation."[7] The rhetor is a true "daemon" whose "symbols create the reality in which people react."[8] Rather than encountering a well-posed problem which demands a proper solution, the rhetor creates and formulates the problem itself at will. The exigence does not invite utterance, but rhetorical "utterance strongly invites exigence."[9]

Bitzer and Vatz together pose an antinomy for a coherent theory of rhetoric: for Bitzer the situation controls the response of the rhetor; for Vatz the rhetor is free to create a situation at will. I shall argue that this apparent antinomy arises from partial views which fail to account for actual rhetorical practice, and that this antinomy disappears with a complete view of the rhetorical act. In part one I argue that Bitzer correctly construes the rhetorical situation as characterized by "particularities," but misconstrues the situation as being thereby determinate and determining. I show that Vatz correctly treats the rhetor as creative, but that he fails to account for the real constraints on the rhetor's activity. The rhetor cannot create exigences arbitrarily, but must take into account the particularities of each situation in which he actively becomes engaged. To resolve the apparent antinomy of rhetor and situation, I propose a mediating third factor, namely, rhetoric as an "art." In part two I establish two conditions such an art must meet to allow the rhetor to become effectively engaged in particular situations, the conditions of integrity and receptivity. In part three I argue that this art of rhetoric is an art of "topics" or commonplaces, showing how a command of topics provides the rhetor with a means for exploring and managing indeterminate contexts.

I.   Situation and Rhetor

Bitzer characterizes the rhetorical situation as constituted by determinate elements or particularities which in turn determine the proper response of the rhetor. The central element or particularity is an "exigence" or urgent and well-posed problem which can be positively modified by an "audience" within the "constraints" of persons, events, things and relations.[10] The rhetor's response is either fitting or unfitting, for "rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation in the

same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question or a solution in response to a problem."[11] Presumably the "exigence" is similar in kind to such well-formed problems and questions as "what is the square root of seventy-two?" and "what is the chemical analysis of a given organic compound?"

But this does not characterize the rhetor's task in the paradigm rhetorical situation. In such an instance the rhetor does not face the relatively clear-cut task of answering a question or solving a well-posed problem in a determinate context. Rather he finds himself "thrown" into an indeterminate existential situation, in which he must make the best of the "facticities" he encounters. Because the incoherence of the situation impinges on forms of life acceptable to himself and his audience, the rhetor must find strategies for shaping the indeterminacies, thereby formulating concrete problems which can be potentially solved. In an incoherent situation the rhetor may encounter speakers who have frozen inquiry in the situation by assuming that determinate problems already exist which demand "prescribed" responses. The rival formulations are themselves part of the incoherent situation, and the rhetor's task is not to simply adopt an alternative "position," but rather to discover what position to adopt by making sense of the situational incoherencies. In Bitzer's formulation, the rhetor does not differ from the expert or scientist who can solve specific problems by using well-formulated methods or procedures, the mathematician who calculates square roots, or the organic chemist who analyzes compounds. Aristotle stresses this distinction between the rhetor and the expert or scientist, claiming that the rhetor does not function in determinate situations, but rather in indeterminate situations in which there are no clear principles or formulated propositions:

> The happier a man is in his choice of propositions, the more he will unconsciously produce a science *(episteme)* quite different from . . . Rhetoric. For if once he hits upon first principles *(archai)* it will no longer be . . . Rhetoric but that science whose principles he has arrived at. . . .[12]

The rhetor's task is not to answer questions and solve well-formulated problems, but rather to be able to *ask* good questions and to formulate or *discover* relevant problems in an indeterminate situation. Problems do not formulate themselves, and the rhetor does not simply find well-posed problems in a situation. Bitzer states that "Normally, the inauguration of a President of the United States demands an address which speaks

to the nation's purposes [and] the central national and international problems. . . ."[13] But clearly the situation in which the President finds himself does not determine what he will say; rather he has the responsibility to discover and formulate what the nation's purposes and central problems are. In reference to the political and economic instabilities of Latin America, for example, one interest group may see the pressing "problem" to be prevention of communist expansion in the hemisphere, while another may see the problem to be one of raising the living standard of the Latin peasant. Until the President as rhetor clarifies what the nation's purposes and problems are, working through the rival formulations and the indeterminate phenomena of the situation, he cannot speak "to" the problems.

The rhetorical situation is an indeterminate context marked by troublesome disorder which the rhetor must structure so as to disclose and formulate problems; hence Bitzer errs in construing the situation as determinate and predetermining a "fitting" response. But the rhetorical situation is not one created solely through the imagination and discourse of the rhetor. It involves particularities of persons, actions, and agencies in a certain place and time; and the rhetor cannot ignore these constraints if he is to function effectively. Hence Vatz errs in construing the rhetor as completely free to create his own exigences at will and select his subject matter in a manner of "pure arbitration." Not every strategy proposed by the rhetor will be fruitful and functional in a given situation, and the rhetor must be responsive to what Kenneth Burke calls the "recalcitrance" of the given situation, those aspects and orders which the rhetor discloses through engagement, which "may force [him] to alter [his] original strategy."[14] The rhetor who finds himself thrown into a rhetorical situation must transform the indeterminacies into a determinate and coherent structure; and in this activity he is constrained by the recalcitrant particularities of the situation which bear on his disclosure and resolution of the issue. A rhetor speaking in Milwaukee in 1968 to the D.A.R. faces a different task than the rhetor who finds himself in St. Petersburg in 1919 addressing young Bolsheviks, amidst the uncertainties and confusion of that situation. The rhetor must work through what Aristotle calls the *pragmata* of the situation[15] in such a way that an issue emerges from his interactions with the situation; and the rhetor who fails to take these constraints into account, spinning issues from his imagination, may never get

in touch with events or his audience, and may rightly be dismissed as ineffective and irrelevant.

The rhetor must be able to enter into an indeterminate situation and disclose or formulate problems therein; he must also present the problems in such a way as to facilitate their resolution by the audience engaged with him in the rhetorical process. Some or all of the particularities of the rhetorical situation are always changing, and if the audience fails to reach a decision, this irresoluteness will itself function as an "action," and have consequences in the situation. If the citizens of Illinois, for example, fail to act positively and decide to prevent industrial pollution from killing Lake Michigan, this irresoluteness will itself lead to the death of the lake. The citizens will then be faced by a novel rhetorical situation demanding further disclosure and resolution.

The rhetor discloses issues and brings them to resolution by interacting with the situation, revealing and working through the phenomena, selecting appropriate material and arranging it into a coherent form. Through his actions the rhetor attains a "disposition" of the situation, or a new way of seeing and acting in the situation. He discloses a new "gestalt" for interpreting and acting in the situation, and thereby offers the audience a new perspective to view the situation. When the audience reaches a decision or judgment, it renders the problematic situation "closed" or resolved, the judgment resulting, in John Dewey's terms, from the "controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified one."[16]

II.   The "Art" of Rhetoric and Its Two Conditions

I have argued in part one that the rhetorical act is one in which a rhetor becomes engaged in a novel and indeterminate situation and is able to disclose and manage exigences therein. I now attempt to show how this rhetorical act is possible, and to resolve thereby the antinomy of rhetor and situation. The real question for rhetorical theory will become not whether the rhetor or situation is dominant, but how, in each case, the rhetor can become engaged in the novel and indeterminate situation and yet have a means of making sense of it.

Bitzer presents the rhetor as able to respond fittingly to the exigent imperfection of a situation; and whereas he admits that some situations may be quite "loosely structured,"[17] he nowhere shows how the rhetor is able to disclose an exigence in such

situations. Bitzer's rhetor does not possess a special capacity which distinguishes him from other problem-solving experts; he has no special power of disclosing problems in novel and indeterminate situations. Nor does Vatz's rhetor possess or require this capacity for discovering such problems, for he is completely free to create "problems" at will. Vatz's rhetor has no means of working through and responding to the recalcitrant particularities of situations, and Vatz provides no means to distinguish relevant problems from those imaginary or hypothetical ones the rhetor merely "invents."

If the rhetor is to function effectively in novel rhetorical situations, disclosing relevant issues in each, he requires a capacity which allows him to be receptive and responsive to the particularities of novel contexts. Aristotle notes that men can and do function in this way, "some by familiarity and others by chance."[18] And what is needed to allow the rhetor to function effectively and consistently is an "art" of rhetoric. If the rhetor becomes master of this art, he will be able to structure novel and indeterminate situations such that fruitful issues "emerge" in each. He will possess a truly "universal" power or capacity to function in the various rhetorical situations which constantly arise. The art of rhetoric is thus a "heuristic" art, allowing the rhetor to discover real issues in indeterminate situations. It is also a "managerial" art, providing the rhetor with means for controlling real situations and bringing them to a successful resolution or closure. If the art of rhetoric is to provide the means by which the rhetor can become effectively engaged in particular situations, it must meet two conditions. These are the condition of *integrity* and the condition of *receptivity*.

The condition of *integrity* demands that rhetoric as an art provide the rhetor with a "universal" capacity such that the rhetor can function in all kinds of indeterminate and particular situations as they arise. As I argued in part one, every rhetorical situation is novel in that the situational particularities are continually changing in time; hence a rhetor without the universal capacity would have no means of discovery and management in a novel situation. As an integral art, the art of rhetoric provides the rhetor with an "integrity" such that he is able to disclose and manage indeterminate factors in novel situations without his action being predetermined. Rather than being forced to respond in a "fitting" manner as Bitzer claims, the rhetor will have a repertoire of options and the freedom to select ways of

making sense anew in each case, disclosing the problems and finding means of attaining their solutions.

But the rhetor cannot be merely a "universal artist" in Vatz's sense, with complete freedom to create problems arbitrarily. The rhetor's universality is restricted to those particular and indeterminate situations I have characterized as rhetorical. The rhetor must be constrained in that he can function in novel but real situations, being true to the particularities of each. The art of rhetoric must meet the condition of *receptivity*, allowing the rhetor to become engaged in individual situations without simply inventing and thereby predetermining which problems he is going to find in them. For if the rhetor merely creates problems at will, disregarding the situational parameters and the particularities therein, he will be unable to achieve an effective resolution or management of the situation. Rather the rhetor must remain receptive to the particularities of the individual situation in a way that he can discover relevant issues. If the art of rhetoric does not allow for *receptivity*, the rhetorical act will be neither heuristic nor managerial.

III.   Rhetoric: The Art of Topics

Because the rhetor cannot know before he becomes receptively engaged in a particular situation what its problems will be, the art of rhetoric must not predetermine what the rhetor finds in the novel situation. But the rhetor must have some means by which he can discover and manage the particularities of each situation. To meet these two conditions of receptivity and integrity, I propose that rhetoric be construed as an art of *topics* or commonplaces.

In the rhetorical tradition of Aristotle, Cicero, Vico, and others, the topic or commonplace is an instrument or device for the invention of arguments and the disclosure of phenomena. The topic is a device which allows the rhetor to discover, through selection and arrangement, that which is relevant and persuasive in particular situations. "One method of selection," writes Aristotle, "and this the first, is the topical."[19] The mastery of topics permits the rhetor to enter into and function in a wide variety of indeterminate fields irrespective of subject matter. For Aristotle, the topics "apply equally to questions of right conduct, natural science, politics, and many other things that have nothing to do with one another."[20] Cicero refers to topics as the study "concerned with the invention of arguments."[21] And Vico

claims that "topics [is] the art of discovery that is the special privilege of the perceptive . . . the art of finding in anything all that is in it."[22] Richard McKeon notes that Vico, Leibniz, and Bacon construed topics as "places for the perception, discovery, and explanation of the unknown."[23]

The topic is thus construed as an essential *instrument* for discovery or invention. But the topic has a second important role in the theory of rhetoric: that is the function of topic as a *realm* in which the rhetor thinks and acts. In this second sense, the "place" of the rhetor is that region or field marked by the particularities of persons, acts, and agencies in which the rhetor discloses and establishes meaningful relationships. The topic is a location or site, the Latin *situs*, from which we derive our term "situation." Thus Bitzer's claim that " 'situation' is not a standard term in the vocabulary of rhetorical theory"[24] is misleading; situation is a central aspect of the rhetor's topical art. The topic functions both as instrument and situation; the instrument *with which* the rhetor thinks and the realm in and *about which* he thinks.

For a coherent view of the rhetorical act both meanings of the "topic" must be maintained. The topic as instrument must remain in dynamic interrelation with the topic as situation; this interrelation allows the rhetor to become engaged in particular situations in a creative way. If either of the two meanings of topic is ignored, and the topic becomes either a mere situation or a mere instrument, the coherence of the rhetorical act breaks down, for there is no way to account for the engagement of the rhetor in the situation. Bitzer ignores the topic as an *instrument*, and his theory becomes one-sided, with the situation determining the actions of the rhetor. Vatz ignores the topic as *situation* in which the rhetor must function, concluding with the untoward remark that the rhetor may create problems arbitrarily and at will.

The topic as instrument has been given various formulations in rhetorical theory, from a single term heading under which arguments may be stored, to a ready-made speech which the rhetor can use on appropriate occasions.[25] But to function as a central device of a rhetoric which meets the two conditions of integrity and receptivity, the topic must maintain a dynamic interplay between instrument and realm, thereby mediating between and dissolving the apparent antinomy of rhetor and situation. I construe the topic as a formal opposition of two (or more) terms which can be used to structure the heteronomous

matter of a particular situation. I follow Aristotle in his construal of topics, for whom the topic is an opposition of terms, the available common topics being "possible-impossible," "future-past" and "amplification-diminution":

> For all orators are obliged, in their speeches, also to make use of the topic of the possible and impossible, and to endeavor to show, some of them that a thing will happen, others that it has happened. Further, the topic of magnitude is common to all kinds of rhetoric, for all men employ extenuation or amplification. . . .[26]

The two terms of the topic, when applied to the indeterminate matter of a context, structure that context so as to open up and delimit a logical place in which the rhetor can discover and manage new meanings and relationships. The topic is thus both instrument and situation in that as merely formal device the topic has no significance: it must be concretely engaged in a particular experiential context. But the context or material situation independent of the formal topic is indeterminate and without meaning. The formal and the material factors must exist in a dynamic interrelation if the rhetor is to be able to discover and manage the particular exigence of the situation.

The rhetor has a freedom of choice as to which terms to use to structure the situation and how to relate the two terms. His freedom, however, is not unlimited, but is constrained by the recalcitrance of the situation: not *any* choice of terms will be functional in a given situation. The rhetor has a repertoire of available topics derived from previous engagements, and in a novel situation he may try several topics before finding those which are fruitful. For example, in facing the rhetorical situation of the United States 1968 Presidential election, a rhetor may declare the central issue to be one of "freedom vs. safety." He thereby structures his view and adopts a position, for he could now argue that an increase in freedom will merely lead to more criminals roaming the streets and more students bombing universities: the increase of freedom diminishes the safety of the ordinary citizen. Or, on the contrary, the rhetor may structure the situation with the topic of "freedom vs. slavery." He will now see the increase of freedom as a positive good, being a release from bondage and tyranny rather than a danger for the citizenry.

The rhetor also has an option to relate the two terms in various modes of opposition. He can treat the two terms of his topic as *contradictories,* in that one becomes the negation of the

other, as in "free and not-free," or "good and not-good." Or he
can treat the terms as *correlatives*, in which each term is neces-
sary for the understanding of the other, and the two cannot
function separately. For example, with "husband and wife," the
meaning of "husband" requires the concept of "wife" and vice
versa.[27] Using the terms "freedom" and "order," the rhetor may
construe them as contradictories in which the achievement of
social order in a society required the denial of all freedom to
the citizens; or vice versa, the demand for freedom required the
destruction of all means of order in the society. The positions
open in this case would be the extremes of totalitarianism or
anarchism. But the rhetor need not be restricted to such a
choice. He may, rather, construe "freedom" and "order" as cor-
relative terms, in which the attainment of freedom required a
degree of order; and for order to exist in society the people
would require personal freedom. The choice open to the rhetor
in this latter formulation is not between totalitarian order or
anarchist freedom; rather the issue itself has changed, and the
task becomes one of discovering the greatest integration and
harmony of social order with personal freedom.

Rhetoric as the art of topics meets the two conditions of in-
tegrity and receptivity. The art has an integrity in that the topics
are universal, formal devices applicable in a variety of novel
situations. The rhetor's choice of topic is not "predetermined"
by the material or the context; rather he is engaged in an inter-
play of devices and material which direct the indeterminate
situation to resolution. The rhetor uses the formal devices for
selecting and arranging the heteronomous matter, and by having
a wide repertoire of topics at his command the rhetor is able to
select those most fruitful for exploration and management in any
given situation.

The art of topics also meets the condition of receptivity, allow-
ing the rhetor to become engaged in a novel situation and
thereby to find and shape issues without predetermining what
he will find. The topic, as formal opposition of terms, opens up
a logical place for investigation; but as formal, the topic requires
an engagement in the particular "matter" of the situation. The
art of topics is not a totally free-floating art of creativity, in
which a rhetor creates problems "arbitrarily." Rather the inter-
play or "rhetorical circle" between devices and situation requires
both a formal and material constraint for effective discovery and
management.

IV. Conclusion

The antinomy posed by Bitzer and Vatz is that either the rhetorical situation controls the acts of the rhetor or the rhetor freely creates the situation. I have argued that the antinomy of rhetor and situation can be resolved by the notion of rhetoric as an art; specifically, an art of topics. Using topics, the rhetor has universal devices which allow him to engage in particular situations, maintaining an "integrity" but yet being receptive to the heteronomies of each case. The real question in rhetorical theory is not whether the situation or the rhetor is "dominant," but the extent, in each case, to which the rhetor can discover and control indeterminate matter, using his art of topics to make sense of what would otherwise remain simply absurd.

NOTES

[1] Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1, 1 (1968), 5.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[5] Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6, 3 (1973), 154.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 157, 158.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

[10] Bitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[12] Aristotle, *The "Art" of Rhetoric*, trans. John Freese (London: Wm. Heinemann Ltd., 1967), 1358a 22-25.

[13] Bitzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

[14] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 255.

[15] Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 1403b 19.

[16] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 117.

[17] Bitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[18] Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 1354a 10.

[19] *Ibid.*, 1396b 20.

[20] Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, ed. Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1966), 1358a 12-14.

[21] Cicero, *Topica*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (London: Wm. Heinemann, Ltd. 1968), p. 387.

[22] Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. M. H. Fisch and T. G. Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944), pp. 123-124.

[23] Richard McKeon, "Creativity and the Commonplace," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6, 4 (1973), 205.

[24] Bitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

[25] Cf. Sister Marie Lechner, *Renaissance Concepts of the Commonplaces* (New York: Pageant Press, 1962).

[26] Aristotle, *The "Art" of Rhetoric, op. cit.*, 1391b 27-31.

[27] Cf. Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, trans. J. L. Ackrill (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), 11b, 15-13b 35. Aristotle also discusses contraries and privatives as modes of opposition.