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Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation

Kathleen M. Hall Jamieson

For centuries the discipline of rhetoric anchored itself in the generic distinctions of Aristotle who classed rhetoric as deliberative, forensic, or epideictic. The Aristotelian taxonomy must strain to account for the sermon, however, and fractures when confronted by the data with which the contemporary critic must deal. New classificatory schemes are being generated to account for such phenomena as brainwashing, body rhetoric, the verbal tantrum and exhortative discourse. The struggle to sort rhetorical phenomena has temporarily, at least, drawn attention from attempts to delineate rhetoric from the poetic and the philosophic. But an historical account of the attempts to differentiate rhetoric from poetic generically could absorb pages. We have suffered a fixation with interdisciplinary generic distinctions. If rhetoric as discipline has been engaged in conscious generic classification from birth, is it not time that we asked what it is that we are about when we make generic distinctions?

Instead of defining genre and exploring the by-products of generic classification, scholars in the field of Speech have tended to treat genre as a trusted friend whose identity is known, whose function is clear, and whose utility is established.[1] We might productively step back from our alliance with genre and ask three questions: Why do genres form? How does genre affect rhetor and critic? What is the function of generic criticism?

Genre, a word borrowed from the French, signifies a distinct species, form, type, or kind.[2] Isolation of genres implies that significantly similar characteristics inhere in works of the same type regardless of author and period of production. A genre of rhetoric contains specimens of rhetoric which share characteristics distinguishing them from specimens of other rhetorical genres. If there is an apologic genre then the apology of Socrates and the Checkers Speech of Richard Nixon, if members of that genre,

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should be similar in significant respects. Moreover, these two specimens should be more comparable than either is to a speech of another genre produced by the same speaker. The Checkers Speech should in salient respects more closely resemble Socrates' Apology than it resembles Nixon's First Inaugural. If rhetorical specimens are more different than similar in significant respects, we would not properly class them as parties to the same genre. When one knows what makes an inaugural an inaugural and not an apology, one has isolated generic characteristics. When one knows what characteristics will inform an inaugural not yet composed, one has isolated the generic membranes of the inaugural.

Genres are shaped in response to a rhetor's perception of the expectations of the audience and the demands of the situation. This point is illustrated by recalling a situation with which we are familiar. A man has died. His loved ones gather around the grave to lay him to rest. One from among them rises to speak. The mood is somber. The members of the audience, pained by a sense of loss, are forced into brutal confrontation with their own mortality. Even if the speaker has never heard or read a eulogy, he will, if he is not an insensitive clod, deliver eulogistic rhetoric. The situation demands it. The audience expects it. Professor Bitzer accounts for the birth of rhetorical forms in terms of recurring situational demands:

> From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established.[3]

I do not wish to deny Bitzer's contention that rhetorical forms are prompted by comparable responses to comparable situations. What I do wish to suggest is that perception of the proper response to an unprecedented rhetorical situation grows *not merely from the situation* but also from antecedent rhetorical forms.

The chromosomal imprint of ancestral genres is evident at the conception of a new genre. Genres are not *sui* generative. How, for example, can a critic account for the religious flavor which permeates Washington's First Inaugural? The situation had not previously occurred. We would not expect, according to Bitzer's analysis, that traditional forms would constrain Washington's response. Noting the religious flavor of that first inaugural, a student of genres might contend that Washington's inaugural is a quasi-religious artifact because the American tradition of theo-

cratic address shaped Washington's response to the inaugural situation. One does not have to vivisect the inaugural to see the imprint of the sermonic form on that specimen of discourse. Washington notes, for example, that "it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplication to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe." The supplication continues:

> In tendering this homage to the great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own. . . . No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States. . . .

The inaugural rehearses the association between virtue and happiness which underlay the natural law theorizing of the day. Then, in ministerial tones, it observes: "We ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained."[4] After cautioning against casual amendment of the Constitution and after renouncing "pecuniary compensation" other than expenses, the inaugural concludes in the supplicative posture of a religious address:

> Once more to the benign Parent of the Human Race in humble supplication that, since he has been pleased to favor the American people with opportunities for deliberating in perfect tranquility, and dispositions for deciding with unparalleled unanimity on a form of government . . . so His divine blessing may be equally *conspicuous* in the enlarged views, the temperate consultations, and the wise measures on which the success of this Government must depend.[5]

The inaugural expresses Washington's belief that the address has grown from the situation. "It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplication to that Almighty Being," he notes. In concluding Washington observes: "Having thus imparted to you my sentiments as they have been awakened by the occasion which brings us together. . . ."[6] Although Washington indicates that the speech is responding to the dictates of the occasion, his perception of the rhetoric demanded by that occasion and his perception of the occasion it-

self is colored by the rhetoric and role of the theocratic leader. Consequently, major portions of the address could have been comfortably delivered by a New England preacher to his parishioners. The supplicative pattern established by Washington's inaugural runs through at least a portion of most other presidential inaugurals.

Some rhetors are more constrained by genre than others because of their sense of the presentness of the past.[7] An institutional spokesman who draws his perceptions of his role from the traditions of the institution itself tends, for example, to feel generic constraints more acutely than does the rhetor not tied to a tradition-bound institution.

Because a long-lived institution initiates a great body of rhetoric, a set of standardized forms for its rhetoric tends to evolve. Presidential Inaugurals and State of the Union addresses are genres or forms of address characteristic of the American presidency. Imperial Roman decrees are similarly distinguishable from other forms of imperial address. Encyclicals, bulls, addresses, and allocations are among the forms standardized by the Roman Catholic Church. These genres have, over the centuries, created expectations in the audiences and rhetors of the institutions.

Establishment and maintenance of definable institutional forms of rhetoric serve to define the institution itself. In a very real sense, the Roman Catholic Church is known to the world as that which issues bulls, addresses, allocations, encyclicals, and *ex cathedra* pronouncements. Doctrine and form become fused as style and content are ultimately fused.

An institutional genre perpetuates and insulates the institution. Existence of standard forms of address guarantees a sense of continuity. It maintains the institution's identity from century to century.

A genre perpetuates a distinguishable institutional rhetoric by creating expectations which any future institutional spokesmen feel obliged to fulfill rather than frustrate. A long-lived institution tends to calcify its genres. The generic traditions of the papacy, for example, specify the rhetorical options of a contemporary Pope. The Pope can present his message in the form of a bull, an allocation, an address, an encyclical. He can speak *ex cathedra* or, as he does in *Humanae Vitae*, in exercise of the ordinary magisterium.

When the Pope, Paul VI, decided that his proscription of birth control should assume encyclical form, the characteristics of the

encyclical genre evolved by past papal encyclicals colored his vision of the rhetoric. It is likely that the nature of the birth control decision and its intended audience weighed in choice of the encyclical form. Paul wished to address all Catholics rather than a particular segment of the Church; he intended his statement to be received by the non-Catholic world as well. A bull or allocation is traditionally directed to a specific segment of the Church, while an encyclical is directed to the whole Church. The encyclical according to Church tradition thus better addressed itself to his intended audience. Paul's subject matter is complex; he could not afford misinterpretation. A written rather than an oral form was demanded. The encyclical form suited his subject because by its nature; an encyclical is written rather than spoken. The encyclical form also serves to suggest the doctrinal significance of *Humanae Vitae*. Had Paul presented the doctrine in the form of an address, it would probably have been taken less seriously.

Expectations are created both in the rhetor and in the audience when the encyclical genre is employed. One expects a definite style, certain types of arguments, a given world view, and standard assumptions in the encyclical genre. Encyclicals are characteristically syntactically complex. They employ static, absolutistic vocabulary and are additionally constrained by the Latin language. Encyclicals rely on tradition for justification for their pronouncements. They tend to assert rather than argue. The world view imposed by encyclicals is essentially static rather than dynamic. Encyclicals tend, moreover, to make the same assumptions. They assume, for example, the existence of natural law, and they also assume that the Pope has the right to interpret natural law for the Church.[8]

The impact of genre is felt not only by the rhetor but also by the critic. The rhetor cannot avoid the play of traditional forms on encapsulation of his message; the audience and the critic within that audience cannot avoid generic classification in perceiving and evaluating the critical object.

We approach a play billed as a comedy expecting to be entertained. When *Waiting for Godot* first played in Miami, it was billed as a comedy. The supper-club audience arrived conditioned by expectations created by viewing Broadway comedy. *Godot* frustrated these expectations. The audience was consequently dissatisfied with the play. A generic misclassification created expectations which the play was not designed to fulfill.

Presidential inaugurals are expected to encapsulate the philos-

ophy and tone of the new administration. The inaugural is expected to employ a dignified mode of address. Were the president to use the occasion to relate titillating stories, our expectations would be shattered and we would react negatively.

When the rhetorical parameters established by the generic tradition are overstepped, reaction is provoked. One element in the implied contract between rhetor and audience is a clause stipulating that he fulfill rather than frustrate the expectations created for the audience by previous rhetoric generated in response to similar situations. When he advocated pacifism in his July 4 oration "The True Grandeur of Nations," Charles Sumner frustrated expectations established through exposure to 75 years of patriotic ceremonial address. Sumner presented a speech one might expect in church or at a peace society meeting to an audience led by tradition to expect the rehearsal rhetoric of the patriotic ceremonial address. Edward L. Pierce wrote:

> Sermons on peace had been often heard from pulpits; peace societies were conspicuous in the calendar of "Anniversary Week"; . . . but no orator on a municipal occasion, before officers and soldiers participating in it, had ever assailed war itself on fundamental grounds.[9]

Sumner had violated the contract implied by the situation and sealed by the expectations of the audience. Sumner was, as a result, rebuked for his "monomania, sophistry and presumption" by some[10] and commended for his bravery by others.[11] The impact of the speech cannot be attributed to the originality of its content. Similar sentiments had been voiced before. Its effect can be attributed to its breach of the generic contract. Boston essayist E. P. Whipple noted: "The great success of Sumner was due to the fact that this oration was studiously framed so as to be utterly *in*appropriate to the occasion."[12]

Generic classification creates expectations of the work in the audience. These expectations color perception of the critical object as well as evaluation of it. When a critic compares a contemporary critical object to great specimens of that type, he is merely formalizing a natural process. When a critic uses great speeches as standards against which to test a new work, he is merely formalizing and adding the value judgments of history to a process innate to camel drivers as well as kings.[13]

The human need for a frame of reference lures the mind to generic classification. Ideally, a critic would suspend classification of a work until he has seen it for what it is. In fact, such

detachment from critical objects is humanly unlikely. If the situation, the billing of the event, and the rhetor's past rhetoric do not crystallize a generic classification before one has experienced the work, the work itself will solicit and obtain generic classification. Recall the reactions of audiences which previewed *Bonnie and Clyde*. The blood drenched climax of the film had not yet become fodder for the cocktail circuit. Aside from occasional hints of forthcoming slaughter, the film solicited laughter. The chases suggested the Keystone Comedies. Audiences, submitting to the entrapment of the film, laughed. A generic classification was made and reinforced. Then, the bloodbaths. Audiences tensed, stunned by generic betrayal. The Keystone Cops had left no carnage. The solicitation and entrapment of *Bonnie and Clyde* can, however, shatter generic expectations but once. Exposure sets up expectations. When other films like *Little Big Man* blend the hilarious with the horrid, the shock is muted. A generic permutation has occurred and audiences approach specimens of it with responses conditioned by *Bonnie and Clyde.*

By speaking of the effects of generic classification as generic constraints, this essay may have inadvertently suggested that generic classification is the boulder of Sisyphus to rhetors and critics. Such need not be the case. Genres should not be viewed as static forms but as evolving phenomena. One should approach study of genres with a Darwinian rather than a Platonic perspective. While traditional genres may color rhetoric they do not ossify it. Rhetors perpetually modify genres. New genres do emerge. Neither does genre necessitate critical stagnation. An understanding of genre will enable the critic to explicate a work, to explore the continuity and discontinuity of rhetorical forms, and to cast a work into productive perspectives.

In short, generic criticism should not serve a procrustean function. As Northrop Frye, the leading contemporary exponent of genre study has observed: "the purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify . . . traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them."[14] When we understand, for example, that the papal encyclical finds its generic roots in the Roman Imperial Decree, we are able to account for the syntactic complexity of the typical encyclical. When we understand that the sermon is the rhetorical ancestor of the presidential inaugural, the religious flavor of portions of the inaugurals is grounded.

Awareness of the way in which generic classification impinges on rhetoric and criticism should also encourage critics to scrutinize the adequacy of classificatory assumptions they impose on any work of rhetoric. By so doing, a potentially productive critical ploy is opened. The critic who understands the manner in which generic classification colors perception of a work should be better able to step away from those classificatory constraints than the critic who is unaware that they are operating on him. By bringing alternative classifications and expectations to a given work, a critic may be better able to explain the work. Thus, a critic might productively view an inaugural as a eulogy, a campaign as a comedy or tragedy.

In summary, a critic armed with an understanding of the nature and function of generic constraints approaches critical objects prepared to explicate them. The critic who ignores genre risks clouding rather than clarifying the rhetoric he is attempting to explain.

NOTES

[1] The manner in which the term "genre" is employed by speech scholars can best be understood by briefly cataloguing the recent appearances of the term in speech journals. In "A Case Study in Speech Criticism: The Nixon-Truman Analog," L. W. Rosenfield (*Speech Monographs,* 35 [November, 1968], 435) suggests that "The generic resemblance of the two speeches [both may be classified as mass-media apologia] invites what may be called analog criticism—comparing the speeches in such ways that each address serves as a reference standard for the other." Although the exploration is not detailed, Rosenfield does suggest that analogic criticism enables one to differentiate rhetorical characteristics attributable to the speaker from those attributable to the genre or situation. He also suggests that analog criticism may serve as a vehicle for determining whether evolution has "occurred in the form itself" (p. 435). The analog modality is placed in critical perspective in Rosenfield's "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse," *Speech Monographs,* 35 (March 1968), 67-68. Butler builds on Rosenfield's criticism of the apologiae of Nixon and Truman in her analysis of Edward Kennedy's July 25, 1969 defense. ("The Apology, 1971 Genre," *Southern Speech Communication Journal,* 37 [Spring, 1972], 281-289.) Bower Aly in "The Gallows Speech: A Lost Genre," *Southern Speech Journal,* 34 (Spring, 1969), 204-213, states (p. 210) that "As with any other genre the exceptional occasion, the anomalous form, may sometimes be more interesting than those speeches which seem to be of a pattern." In "Genre and Rhetoric in Dryden's 'Upon the Death of the Lord Hastings' " Gayle Edward Wilson analyzes the poem as a model of decorum, locating it in the epideictic genre (*Southern Speech Journal,* 35 [Spring, 1970], 256-266). Hermann G. Stelzner ("The Quest Story and Nixon's November 3, 1969 Address," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 57 [April, 1971], 163-172), on the other hand, employs a literary genre as a vehicle for analyzing a political address. In "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," Theodore Otto Windt, Jr. (*Quarterly*

Journal of Speech, 58 [February, 1972]) tries "to establish distinct rhetorical genres to interpret rhetorical acts."

[2] Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 1 (January, 1968), 2.

[3] *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents,* annotated by Davis Newton Lott (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), pp. 3-4.

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

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

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

[7] How rhetors and critics come to be influenced by generic constraints is an intriguing question. Some situations so clearly imply a response that even the insensitive are likely to perceive situational demands. But what of less constrained situations? One can consciously absorb the constraints of the past. By poring over past presidential inaugurals before generating a draft of an inaugural, presidential speechwriters imbue themselves with the constraints of the past. Similarly, the student of rhetorical tradition is by osmotic process if not by design impregnating himself with generic constraints. But what of the individual who feels generic constraints despite the fact that he does not command a studied sense of the rhetorical tradition? Perhaps members of a society sensitize themselves to genres in the same manner in which a child sensitizes himself to the structures of his parents' language. The question of generic assimilation deserves examination.

[8] Cf. Jamieson, "A Rhetorical-Critical Analysis of the Conflict over *Humanae Vitae,*" unpublished dissertation, Chapters two, four, and five.

[9] *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner:* 1838-45 (Boston: Roberts' Brothers, 1881), II, 343.

[10] David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 112.

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 117.

[12] Quoted by Donald, p. 117.

[13] When the man in the street says "Nixon's inaugural was ok but not as good as Kennedy's," he is assuming that the two works can be legitimately compared; in short, that they are generically comparable. If, on the other hand, he were to state "Nixon's inaugural was every bit as good as an Alka-Seltzer commercial," we would assume that the remark was intended sarcastically. We make that judgment because we do not regard commercials and inaugurals as generically comparable.

[14] *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 247-248.