

Title: Rhetorics and materiality

Reading: From various places in ATH

Rhetorical moment 1(pp. 3-4): *The individual/environment dialectic*. Humans interact with their environment. This interaction requires attitudes in the Burkean sense of the term – orientations toward it. “One constructs his notion of the universe or history, and shapes attitudes in keeping” (p. 3). With these attitudes we welcome or prepare to confront the world out there. We do it with a vocabulary and structures that permit us to deal with it.

But this sounds so individual and the process is not really a process of individuals. “One confronts contradictions. Insofar as they are resolvable contradictions he acts to resolve them. Insofar as they are not resolvable, he symbolically erects a ‘higher synthesis,’ in poetic and conceptual imagery, that helps him to ‘accept’ them” (92). Still an individual discourse. “One” is the operative pronoun. (Notice that in Pepper’s sense this is the recipe of an organicist theory of rhetoric.)

Rhetorical moment 2. *Social motivation*. But then, the social must enter. “Out of such frames we derive our vocabularies for the charting of human motives. And implicit in our theory of motives is a program of action, since we form ourselves and judge others (collaborating with them or against them) in accordance with our attitudes” (92). Now we have moved to the social. Symbolic motives have emerged and with them the higher synthesis. “One must erect a vast symbolic synthesis, a rationale of imaginative and conceptual imagery that ‘locates’ the various aspects of experience. This symbolism guides social purpose: it provides one with ‘cues’ as to what he should try to get, how he should try to get it, and how he should ‘resign himself’ to a renunciation of the things he can’t get” (179).

So rhetorical moment 1 is the moment when facing the contradictions of the material world, rhetoric constructs higher synthesis that name, establish attitude, and guide action with regard to those material conditions. This second rhetorical moment exists at the level of the symbolic. This rhetoric performs in a social context the interpretive function. It has characteristic moves that convert the material into meaning, interpretation, and action.

“Here we shall center attention upon those ‘collective poems’ evolved by the widest group activities. Our emphasis is not upon individual strategy, but upon the productive and mental patterns developed by aggregates. The two emphases are not mutually exclusive, since the individual’s frame is built of materials from the collective frame, but the change from one to the other shifts the emphasis from the poetic to the historical” (111). So, here are the two moments in conjunction with each other. This is the level of the “curve of history.”

Rhetorical moment 3. *Individual/social dialectic*. There is the socially defined symbolic synthesis supported by history (moment 2), and now the individual rhetor having to orient toward that synthesis (moment 1 plus moment 2). Moment 2 is a macro rhetorical construction, a symbolic synthesis that governs attitudes toward the material world, but which we can study as a way of encountering that world. Thus it is a rhetorical study not a material one. Now we open the possibility of individuals who generate rhetoric within this symbolic construct of moment 2. “Since the individual mind is formed by incorporating such social materials, the social

rationalization induces a sense of individual shortcomings, leading to a sense of guilt insofar as his private act is felt as a departure from its ideal” (164n). Thus, we get the process of catharsis engaged within the tensions out of disparity with moment 2.

Burke endorses an attitude of the comic for this moment. But he also tracks how the rhetoric of moment 2 can evolve through this process.

Rhetorical moment 4. *Parliamentary dialectics.* Next we get a view of society as Babel with many competing frames, some accepting, some rejecting, some passive. “Hence, we next proceeded to discuss the broader aspects of symbolism, by noting some of the principal processes involved in political relationships (problems of synthesis and sect)” (106). So, now the “he” of the first vision has become a diverse texture of discourse with different interpretations. We now get the intricacies of diverse interpretations within the society. “Groups tend to ‘move in on’ such symbolic structures, profiting by the areas of resignation until people are asked to tolerate the intolerable (whereas, if a different symbolism of purpose and necessity were adopted, the intolerable conditions could be eradicated)” (179). Burke goes on to describe the dynamics of this moment: “A complex symbolism [moment 2] is a kind of ‘spiritual currency’ – and a group of ‘bankers’ may arise who manipulate this medium of exchange to their special benefit. Their efforts need not even be consciously directed to this end. The superstructural frame may so function regardless, producing dispossession and alienation largely as an ‘unintended byproduct.’ All such eventualities lead to the necessity for symbolic tinkering” (179). Thus, we get the tension between individual interest or partial rationale and the playing out of moment 2.

Now the contradictions are revealed not only in the material or between the material and the moment 2 form, but within the moment 2 form. “The stimulus towards transcendence, or symbolic bridging and merging, arises from the many kinds of conflict among values implicit in a going social concern. Such conflicts are heightened to the point of crisis, necessitating scrupulous choices between acceptance and rejection or the authoritative symbols” (179).