

THE FORUM

“CONVENTIONAL WISDOM— TRADITIONAL FORM”: A REJOINDER

Professor Hill's analysis of Nixon's Vietnamization address in this issue of *QJS*, has added a neo-Aristotelian critique to the roster of criticisms of that speech already published. However, Professor Hill has invited controversy by attacking the methodologies of the other critics, chiefly Professor Robert Newman and myself. I have taken advantage of the opportunity to respond because I think the conflict highlights certain important issues in rhetorical criticism.

Professor Hill legitimates his methodology by appealing to the authority of Aristotle, but in the tradition of heretics, I must demur at several points from his interpretation of the “true faith.” I am chiefly concerned with his exclusion of considerations of truth and ethical assessments and with his treatment of the “target audience.”

In responding to the exclusion of the truth criterion, I am inclined to appeal to “conventional wisdom” and “traditional form” in interpreting Aristotelian methodology. Thonssen and Baird, for example, treat the evaluation of logical content as one of determining “how fully a given speech enforces an idea; how closely that enforcement conforms to the general rules of argumentative development; and how nearly the totality of the reasoning approaches a measure of truth adequate for purposes of action” (*Speech Criticism*, 1948, p. 334) and specifically call for the rigorous testing of evidence and argument (p. 341). Aristotle himself wrote that rhetoric is

valuable “because truth and justice are by nature more powerful than their opposites; so that, when decisions are not made as they should be, the speakers with the right on their side have only themselves to thank for the outcome. . . . [A proper knowledge and exercise of Rhetoric would prevent the triumph of fraud and injustice.]” (*Rhetorica*, trans. Lane Cooper, 1. 1. 1355^a 21-24). These statements are at odds with Hill's assertion that “neo-Aristotelian criticism does not warrant us to estimate the truth of Nixon's statements or the reality of the values he assumes . . .” (p. 385). In fact, there is a puzzling inconsistency in Professor Hill's essay. On the one hand, Newman and I are chided for questioning the President's choice of policy and premises; on the other, Hill himself takes pains to justify the choice of premises, stating that an assessment of the choice of major premises is central to an Aristotelian account. He discusses the truth of the premises used, e.g., “we know that the premise is not universally true, yet everyone finds it necessary to operate in ordinary life as if it were,” “they rest on what experience from the sandbox up shows to be probable,” and so forth (pp. 378, 379). Similarly, there are numerous comments indicating Hill's recognition of the highly deceptive nature of this speech in which Nixon said we were to be told the truth, e.g., “this explanation masquerades as . . . ,” “but thinly disguised in the chronology . . . ,” “this phrase concealed the intention . . . ,” and, finally, “the finely crafted structure that conceals exactly what needs to be concealed

. . ." (pp. 376, 377, and 384). As I see it, Hill is arguing for the truth and acceptability of the major premises while recognizing the deception central to the *logos* of this address. The final statement I have cited makes the point of his critique explicit in regard to questions of truth: what we are to applaud as critics is highly skillful deception and concealment. As a critic, that is a bitter pill I cannot swallow.

The issue I have raised not only involves considerations of truth but ethical assessments, and I propose that an amoral reading of Aristotle is open to question. In the section on deliberative rhetoric to which Hill directs us, Aristotle reiterates that rhetoric "combines the science of logical analysis with the ethical branch of political science . . ." (1. 4. 1359^b 9-11). Similarly, immediately following the analogy to health care cited by Hill comes the statement that "sophistic dialectic, or sophistic speaking, is made so, not by the faculty, but by the moral purpose" (1. 1. 1335^b 16-18). These statements are coherent parts of a teleology defining man as rational and an ethic stating that moral good consists in acting in obedience to reason (*Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. W. D. Ross, 1. 13 1102^b 13-28). It seems to me that Aristotle enables the critic to recognize the skillful use of the faculty, i.e., the best (most effective) choices from the inventory, and to condemn the moral purpose and the rhetorical act as sophistic, perhaps even "shoddy." And Aristotle's description of the nature of deliberative rhetoric provides an additional warrant for combining concerns for truth and ethics. He says that the aim of deliberation is determination of advantage and injury with primary emphasis on expediency (1. 3. 1358^b 22-24), suggesting that questions of practicality and feasibility are essential to rational decision-making in deliberative addresses.

Consequently, I take it that even an Aristotelian critic, confronting a deliberative speech that seeks to avoid questions of expediency and conceals the true nature of the policy being advocated (which Hill admits), might be justified in making a negative assessment.

Finally, Aristotle says that the deliberative speaker must "know how many types of government there are; what conditions are favorable to each type; and what things . . . naturally tend to destroy it" (1. 4. 1360^a 20-23), elements relevant to deliberative rhetoric which lead me to object to Hill's assessment of the speech in terms of a "target audience." As he recognizes, political factors and the political context are germane to criticism. There is no dispute that this was a major policy address by the President to the nation. But contrary to Hill's assertion that Aristotelian methodology does not warrant questioning whether or not Nixon should have chosen to ignore parts of his constituency, I submit that Aristotle encourages the critic to recognize that this was not simply a speech by Richard Nixon, but a deliberative address from the Presidency—as institution, symbol, and role—to *all citizens in this republic-democracy*. I am not satisfied that the kind of divisiveness created through this rhetorical act in this political context can be excused by delineating a "target audience." In my critique, I argued that the President eliminated the concept of a "loyal opposition" by creating a dichotomy between the "great silent majority" that supports administrative policy and a "vocal minority" seeking to prevail "over reason and the will of the majority." Aristotle said that the end of democracy is liberty, and if that ambiguous term is to mean anything, it has to include the liberty to dissent from policy without being labeled in terms that suggest that dissent is subversive, if not

traitorous. I recognized that Nixon paid lip service to the idea of a loyal opposition ("Honest and patriotic Americans have reached different conclusions as to how peace should be achieved."), but the remainder of the address contradicts this strongly, e.g., "the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate" and "only Americans [presumably only *dissenting* Americans] can humiliate and defeat the United States." To assess the speech in terms of a "target audience" is to ignore the special kind of disunity created by the speech which, I believe, is a threat to the political processes of our system of government, particularly when propounded by its chief executive.

As I read Professor Hill's criticism of the analyses of Professor Newman and myself, it seems to me that he believes a major shortcoming of both is a lack of "objectivity." He implies that neo-Aristotelian methodology is "objective," genuinely rhetorical (rather than political or ideological), and, in fact, is the only legitimate methodology—it makes "true significance possible" (p. 386). However, as I understand it, Hill's conception of objectivity requires the critic to remain entirely within the closed universe of the discourse and the ideology or point of view it presents. No testing of premises or data is permitted except that determining the degree of *acceptability* to the immediate audience or, more narrowly, to that part of it that is the speaker's target. This is, of course, commendably consistent with his exclusions of considerations of truth and ethics, but it hardly qualifies as objectivity. It is, in fact, to choose the most favorable and partisan account a critic can render. For example, it is to accept the perspective of the advertiser and applaud the skill with which, say, Anacin commercials create the false belief that their product is a more effective

pain reliever than ordinary aspirin. As a consequence, the methodology produces analyses that are at least covert advocacy of the point of view taken in the rhetorical act—under the guise of objectivity. Recognizing that anyone reading my critique of this address will know that I am politically liberal (the same, I think, is true of Professor Newman), my simple rejoinder is that anyone reading Hill's critique will know that he is politically conservative.

The particular point on which he takes me to task, my objections to Nixon's view of the origins of the war, is highly illustrative. Professor Hill writes, "When Nixon finds the origin of the war in a North Vietnamese 'campaign to impose a Communist government on South Vietnam by instigating and supporting a revolution,' Campbell takes him to task for not telling the truth" (p. 385). But Nixon said, "Fifteen years ago North Vietnam, *with the logistical support of Communist China and the Soviet Union*, launched a campaign . . ." (emphasis added). What I said was:

Now "fifteen years ago" was 1954, the year of the Geneva Agreements that were to unify Vietnam through elections to be held in 1956. Those elections never occurred because the United States supported Diem, who refused elections and attempted to destroy all internal political opposition, Communist and otherwise. The Vietcong did not persuade Hanoi or Peking or Moscow to aid them against Diem until about 1959. By 1965 South Vietnam was clearly losing, the point at which President Johnson decided to send in United States combat forces (*Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 1972, p. 52).

Professor Hill has condensed both Nixon's and my own comments about the North Vietnamese campaign *with* alleged aid from China and Russia into the simpler notion of a North Vietnamese campaign to instigate revolution and impose a Communist regime on the South. This condensation, although un-

derstandably desirable from a conservative point of view and understandably unacceptable from a liberal viewpoint, hardly qualifies as an objective appraisal of Nixon's characterization of the origins of the war or of my response to it. My point was and is that Nixon wished to disclaim all U.S. responsibility for the events with which we now wrestle in Indochina and place all blame on a monolithic Communist conspiracy. I think it highly doubtful that the "scientific historian" to whom Hill refers would support that characterization.

It should also be evident that I do not agree with Professor Hill that neo-Aristotelianism is the only, or even the best, methodology for rhetorical criticism. As Hill's essay illustrates, such an approach has explanatory power for revealing how a speaker produced the effects that he did on one part of the audience, what Hill calls the "target audience," but it ignores effects on the rest of the audience, and it excludes all *evaluations* other than the speech's potential for evoking intended response from an immediate, specified audience. Because I do not believe that the sole purpose of criticism is an assessment of a discourse's capacity to achieve intended effects, I cannot accept Hill's monistic view of critical methodology. I am strongly committed to pluralistic modes of criticism, considering that the questions the critic asks have such a significant effect on the answers generated. I think we know more about Nixon's rhetorical act because a variety of critical approaches have been brought to it than if Professor Hill's critique stood alone.

The objections I have made so far to Professor Hill's views of criticism and of critical methodology have been, I believe, important ones, but my final objection is, for me, the most important. In describing and defending the uses of rhetoric, Aristotle says that we should

be knowledgeable about both sides of a question so that "if our opponent makes unfair use of the arguments, we may be able in turn to refute them," and he continues, to remark that although rhetoric and dialectic, abstractly considered, "may indifferently prove opposite statements. Still, their basis, in the facts, is not a matter of indifference . . ." (I. 1. 1355^a 30-37). If rhetoric is to be justified, then rhetorical criticism must also be justifiable. For criticism, too, is rhetoric. Its impulse is epideictic—to praise and blame; its method is forensic—reason-giving. But ultimately it enters into the deliberative realm in which choices must be made, and it plays a crucial role in the processes of testing, questioning, and analyzing by which discourses advocating truth and justice may, in fact, become more powerful than their opposites.

The analogy that Professor Hill draws between neo-Aristotelian methodology and metrical conventions as "limitations that make true significance possible" (p. 386) is an interesting one, particularly for an Aristotelian. After all, it was Aristotle who recognized that poetry could not be defined metrically: "though it is the way with people to tack on 'poet' to the name of a metre . . . thinking that they call them poets not by reason of the imitative nature of their work, but indiscriminately by reason of the metre they write in" (*De Poetica*, trans. Ingram Bywater, l. 1447^b 12-16). Perhaps a more apt analogy is that the strict application of a rhetorical inventory may make the critic a versifier, but not a poet.

KARLYN KOHRS CAMPBELL
State University of New York
at Binghamton

REPLY TO PROFESSOR CAMPBELL

Professor Campbell's rejoinder states clearly the positions opposed to mine

