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Rhetorical appeal and the uncertainty of hope

ABSTRACT

The article examines an article that Dirk Smit wrote about rhetoric and theology against the background of other of his articles, particularly about the Confession of Belhar. It argues that Smit's article is "judiciously sceptical" about rhetoric because he is committed not only to faith, but also to the uncertainty of hope. This commitment is, it is argued, compatible with rhetoric, but only with a certain type of rhetoric. Such a hopeful rhetoric, which does not accept the closure of tragedy, reaches out to others across tragic divisions as the Confession of Belhar did. The final section examines how Smit's article is itself a rhetorical act and tries to identify the particular appeal he makes on readers.

The machinery of language is so made that, either rightly or wrongly, either grandly or in fragments, we stretch forth our hands through love of the farther shore.

(Burke 1966:200, adapted in part from Virgil)

THE VIRTUE OF SCEPTICISM; THE VICE OF CYNICISM

That Dirk Smit, whose ability to survey broad landscapes of theology never ceases to amaze, also wrote about "theology as rhetoric" (Smit 1996) is not very surprising; that he did so with erudition, insight and a hint of judicious scepticism is not surprising at all. Whereas erudition and insight are recognised scholarly virtues, it is seldom recognised that a degree of scepticism is a virtue in a Christian theologian. Christian faith, in its concrete scope, is dialectically related to equally concrete doubts that it permits, encourages and demands.¹

Faith permits Christians to doubt, in an ordinary human way, whether the latest academic trend is really a gospel worthy of belief. It encourages them to be mindful of human frailty and thus to doubt whether even their own constructs are better than makeshifts. It demands of them that they severely doubt theories of such a mechanistic and deterministic cast that they apparently leave no room for God's creative and redemptive acts.

Although he does not, to my knowledge, deal with the matter directly, Smit seems fully aware of the need for "Christian scepticism". Drawing on the old image of a rhetorical performance as a feast or "dinner party",² he asks at the start whether his "divergent eating habits" as a Reformed *dogmatikus* will allow him to partake of the dishes set before him (1996:3-94). At the close he again asks whether he can really be party to the party or whether he should remain outside, "eating his crackers in his cabin" (1996:4-22). Question marks are found in his title, in his penultimate sentence, in all but one of the section headings and frequently in the

¹ This was frequently stressed by Chesterton and noted in passing by Burke (1935:107).

² The image is at least as old as Plato (1931b:325; 1931a:431) and was a commonplace at least until the Renaissance (Jeanneret 1991:91ff.).

rest of this article (indeed in many of his articles). The point is well taken: Who sets the menu and decides who eats whom? “Theology as rhetoric” might mean that the one digests and transforms the other. Smit is legitimately concerned lest Reformed theology be sacrificed to furnish the festive meal.

Sepsis is not cynicism. Sceptical questions await answers; cynical ones, by assuming that all answers are equally inadequate, conclude conversations in the style of Pilate. Smit (1996:421) rightly warns that a form of rhetorical criticism may become “a powerful cynical tool in a new cynical discourse”, an unmasking without an apocalypse.³ Smit’s reasons for rejecting cynicism are theological. He devotes several pages (1996:395ff.) to explaining why he cannot give up commitment and persuasion, why he cannot adopt the position of the neutral analyst. In this regard he mentions the Belhar Confession of which he was a coauthor (1996:396). Christian scepticism loses its warrant when it excludes the possibility of a confessional stance issuing in a substantive confession, one that has substance. While such a confession is rhetorical in that it speaks from commitment (being persuaded!) towards persuasion, it can have no truck with postmodern “rhetoricity” (cf. Bender and Wellbury 1990:25ff.) as a condition of permanent flux, which denies, as its first article of faith, any notion of substance.⁴

To answer Smit’s questions about rhetoric systematically would require a book studded with further questions. Rhetoric, just like theology, can be defined in countless ways.⁵ Instead of this, I shall approach some of the questions obliquely, drawing on, among others, some of Smit’s other articles, particularly about the text and context of the Belhar Confession, and on Kenneth Burke, my mentor in these matters. In the final section I return to the article in question and make a stab at finding Smit’s own rhetorical strategy.

ENCOMPASSING TRAGEDY: INVIGORATING HOPE

Cheryl Exum (1992:15) quotes with approval Sewald’s view that the tragic vision is “not for those who cannot live with unsolved questions or unresolved doubts”. This may hold for observers; virtually the opposite is true of protagonists. Much tragedy ensues from our failure to attain our purposes, yet we are virtually always able to ensure tragic endings. Unable to unravel the tangle of our lives, we bring matters to a close through literal or figurative suicide or homicide, thus determining our destiny by a process of termination. Closure comes, as it were, naturally in literary tragedies: they conclude because virtually all the main characters

3 A hermeneutics of suspicion can be virtuously sceptical or viciously cynical. Burke frequently warns against the cynical variant, which he calls debunking (1952:97, 407; 1955a:36, 66f., 74, 93, 165, 256, 338): it approaches positivism, it is either antisocial or limited to the group, it is dangerous to the character of the debunker.

4 In this vein Vorster (1999:287f.) objects to the “objectivism and foundationalism” (he conflates the two) that he still detects in biblical rhetorical critics with their focus on the ancient text. They might insist that one should first know “as well as possible” the language to read “the original text”, the literary codes (genres) and rhetorical practices of that time and society, and the whole corpus (of the Bible). Then one has to get to know the history of the language and the society, and the theological and rhetorical traditions, in brief, the historical context. Finally, one has to assess “probabilistically” what the author meant to say and how the author was heard. All this comes from that notorious foundationalist Derrida (1988:144), telling us how we should begin to read Rousseau (I put “theological” for “philosophical”).

5 One possibility that I reject is simply to rejoice in the proliferation of discourses about rhetoric. I am not convinced that Wuellner (1989) avoids this and find his account diffuse. Nor do I find a slavish copying of the classical terminology helpful.

are dead.

A dual reading of the tragic eventuality is usually possible. The grammar of tragedy speaks of inevitability, of vast internal or external forces foreclosing on the plans and ideals of the human actors. The sheer imbalance – the human against the cosmic (cf. Burke 1955a:42; Exum 1992:11) – lends grandeur to tragic heroes, who, by the grammar of tragedy, lose only because victory was humanly impossible. Precisely this frequently permits a rhetoric of tragedy in which the emphasis falls on supreme and defiant human action. Thus those who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they are bereft of other significant power may affirm their “agency” and the importance of their lives by manufacturing tragedy. “I am the captain of my soul” – and I prove it by steering the ship on the rocks. Shooting people at random in a public place is arguably the easiest and surest way to make it to the headlines. Simultaneously the assumption is invited that such extreme measures imply an extreme motivation: the tragic occludes the trivial. By shuttling between these two readings, one can encompass (embrace) tragedy⁶ and aver that one is encompassed by it, thus reaping the benefits of tragic “magnification” (Burke 1955a:43) and victimhood simultaneously.

Hope too allows for a double reading. Uncertainty belongs to its grammar,⁷ but in Christian rhetoric hope, being linked to faith, is an expression of a firm conviction. Grammatically, what one hopes for lies beyond one’s absolute control: something or someone else can frustrate or realise one’s hopes. In this sense, hope implies the openness of the future.⁸ If, however, one affirms that the future is in God’s hands, hope is firmly anchored in God’s $\pi\sigma\tau$, unpredictable in form, but unchanging in substance. Here too a double benefit accrues. No present “certainty”, however grim, can trump the uncertainty of hope, yet, since the unknown future belongs to God, not fate, hope offers remarkable security. When I “hope that”, uncertainty prevails; when I “place my hope in” someone trustworthy, I am secured by the other. Hope, which invigorates us in the face of adversity, is itself invigorated by trust. Whereas tragedy isolates (cf. Exum 1992:11), Christian hope lives from and towards community.

The Belhar Confession could have been a statement of heroic resignation in the tragic mode, a dramatic act of symbolic homicide directed at the apparently all powerful enemy, although it would then not have been a confession of Christian faith. When Synod decided that the Accompanying Letter should always be published with the Confession, it removed possible doubts in this regard, as Smit (2007c:157) recognises. The Accompanying Letter reaches forward, confronting the apparent certainties of the present with the openness of God’s future. Equally clearly, the letter, by reaching out to the “enemy”,⁹ refuses to accept division as a predetermined cosmic reality (an order of creation). Finding itself in a de facto order of division and ordered to accept this “reality”, URCSA appealed – to a higher Judge and its human critics. If the Confession in itself was faithful rhetoric, the appending of the letter made it eminently hopeful rhetoric, a rejection of tragic closure.

6 I agree with those who believe that Judaism and Christianity exclude a tragic view of the world. Cf. Lawrie (2011, particularly n7) to which may be added the view of Jaspers (quoted in Glicksberg 1963:36ff.).

7 Wittgenstein (1968:129) says something like this about wishing and expecting; it clearly applies to hoping as well.

8 Thus hope does not eliminate suffering. Cilliers (2007:394ff.) rightly regards lament as part of the language of hope.

9 Thus Smit (2007c:163, 165) says that the letter is “almost like an outstretched hand”; it speaks “pleadingly”.

APPEALING RHETORIC; RHETORICAL APPEAL

Smit (1996:398ff.) says that, precisely as a Christian theologian, he would want to speak persuasively; he also knows that power enters into rhetorical transactions (1996:396f.). Ideally, perhaps, rhetoric persuades an audience, yet audiences may be swayed, if not fully persuaded, by many factors. Both a gun held to one's head and the offer of a bribe are powerfully "persuasive"; so are their rhetorical equivalents. Thus rhetoric can be most appealing precisely when it is least rhetorical, least dependent on verbal performance. But there is a curious dialectic of strength and weakness in the rhetoric of power. When I flaunt my power rhetorically to attain my ends, I acknowledge my weakness – I cannot attain my ends and secure my power without the cooperation of others. Often simply exercising my power would defeat my ends and end my power. Conversely, when I play on the weakness of another, I have to assume that the particular weakness, say greed, is strong enough for my purpose.¹⁰ Rhetoric, even at its most corrupt, depends on cooperation and embodies an appeal.

What one must ultimately make of "theology as rhetoric" is anybody's guess, for, as Burke (1952:503f) pointed out, "X as Y" is the formula of metaphor and metaphor embodies one perspective without excluding others. In some ways theology can usefully be seen as rhetoric; in other ways not.¹¹ Is it ever useful to see rhetoric as theology? Kenneth Burke sometimes comes close to saying this, without, I believe, simply replacing "God" with "language" as some postmodern theorists tend to do.

When Burke (1970:1) notes the close relationship between "theology" as "words about God" and "logology" (his coinage) as "words about words" and later draws seven analogies between "words" and "the Word" (1970:7-34), it seems as if theology is reduced to logology. But still later he adds that "logology fails to offer grounds for the perfection of promises and threats that theology allows for" (1970:300). Moreover, language as symbolic action (not mere motion) always contains a creative moment that cannot be encompassed in a science of cause and effect.¹² In as much as language is meaningful, it is imbued with purpose, for meaning is an attenuation of purpose (1952:290f.). As creative, purposeful act, language always involves a form of transcendence, a reaching out (as in the quotation at the top of the article). Although the reaching out can be misguided and trivial and the transcendence "downwards", language always and by its nature aims beyond itself (cf. 1952:420ff.): this is one reason why Burke retains a notion of God (1955b:178f., 290f.). Also, since human language is rooted in the "hortatory no", language "ethicises" and introduces hierarchy (1966:9-16, 359-378, 419-436). Finally, rhetoric – the use of language "to induce cooperation" (1955b:43) – both assumes and creates community: its aim is identification in which people become consubstantial with one another (1955b:19ff. and *passim*).

This is a sketchy account, but adding a little more would not help much, for Burke is nothing if not convoluted. He has, however, persuaded me that when one views language as symbolic action, questions appear that are entirely overlooked in both structuralism and post-structuralism. These questions can only be dealt with in theology or in metaphysics, which Burke regards as coy theology (1970:300). Burke himself remained coy, arguably because

10 This is the point that Socrates successfully establishes against Callicles (Plato 1931a:369ff.).

11 The metaphor is a useful reminder that theology does not describe a state of affairs "out there" or inside the believer, but is always an appeal, a reaching out.

12 Burke often harks back to the distinction between action and motion (1952:59ff.; 1966:53, 63; 1978:32f.).

he could not muster the hope (rather than faith or love) for which his insights made ample allowance.

CONSTRUCTING AUDIENCES; CONSTRUCTED AUDIENCES

As Smit (1996:419) notes, the construction of the audience is a live issue in current rhetorical debates. Perelman set the ball rolling when he pointed out that “the rhetorical audience” is always a construction of the rhetorician. Arguments and appeals that are not ad hominem beg the question (cf. Perelman 1982:21ff.). The subtext here is frequently overlooked. The rhetorical audience is, to be sure, a symbolic construction, yet if the construction is not a reasonably accurate reflection of the real audience, the rhetorical act will fail. Thus, one has to be a good listener in order to be a good speaker or writer. Others shifted the emphasis to how audiences are constructed (called into being, interpellated) by the dominant rhetoric. “Audience construction” gained a sinister ring, because powerful rhetoric and the rhetoric of power could amount to an imposition. We convince others by making them convicts, incarcerated in discourses that deter mine what should count as “meaning”.

At roughly the same time, it became fashionable to say that audiences construct the meaning of texts, which have no authority to impose any particular meaning. It is sometimes added that these constructing audiences were themselves constructed by interpretive communities. This leads to the final permutation, in which audiences, texts and everything else are constructions, reconstructed and deconstructed in an ineluctable, opaque process. Indeed, it is hard to say what constructs what, for subjects and objects disappear in the all that may be called, apparently without significant difference, rhetoric, text, context, writing, discourse, ideology or interpretation. The subtle juggle the balls expertly; the epigones, when they are not trivially incoherent, often suggest, with an unconvincing nod at Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, that one simply has to keep abreast of the times – whatever is, is good.¹³ This provides fertile soil for cynicism to flourish, though few would admit to being cynics.

Versions of the last three views remain common, often in bewildering combinations. Thus it is sometimes said that in theory audiences do “make meaning”, free from the dead hand of the text, and that in practice audiences are putty in the hands of ideology, therefore we should take responsibility for our rhetoric, thereby willingly binding ourselves to ... what? The first view has all but disappeared, yet it seems to be the only truly hopeful one. It recognises the appeal of rhetoric and the dialectic of strength and weakness implied by it. It makes no claims to certainty, but it locates the uncertainty in the everyday play of human interaction rather than the distant play of signifiers. Thus it is also the only view that features what we normally call “human society”, the society in which we grope somewhat blindly for one another – to strangle and rob and also to embrace and caress.¹⁴ It acknowledges that we often construct others and are constructed by them in constricting ways, but adds that construction can sometimes also imply edification. It is such an all too human rhetoric that I advocate, also for theologians (cf. also Smit 2007b:151).

Yet rhetoric as humanistic discourse (cf. Hunt 1984:13ff.) cannot be the last word for theologians

13 Thus I am not surprised to find Vorster saying: “these turns insist that ...” (1999: 294) and “language acts ...” (1999:308).

14 I have previously argued that gainsaying, going up against someone, may end in consensus, in each saying again what the other had said (Lawrie 2001:414). The transition between fighting and friendship is dramatised effectively in the combat between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

(cf. Smit 2007b:153). The other views have something to say about human bondage (view 2), about creativity and responsibility (view 3) and about the beyond of our acts (view 4). I suggest that theology, in speaking openly about sin, ethics and God, may deal with these aspects more clearly and directly than any rhetorical theory can.¹⁵ In Burke's terms, Christian theology has a more rounded terminology, one which includes rhetoric without simply passing into it. Rhetoric has been used to dominate; so have ethics and theology (cf. Smit 2007a), for sin always gets its word in. Nevertheless, God is the Word and God's is the first and last word. This is our "uncertain" security, which allows and bids us to reach out in appeal, mustering what creativity and responsibility we have, neither arrogantly nor unduly abashed.

GUESS WHO'S BEING SERVED FOR DINNER

Smit (1996:422, citing Alves) ends his article by referring to Gandhi, who "ate crackers in his cabin" because he feared being marginalised at a table where different rules prevailed. Some Indians might have done the same for a different reason: a Brahmin might refuse to dine with people from outside his caste for fear of contamination. Although Gandhi personally shared a table with all sorts of people, he wrote that he did not consider refusal to eat with someone from another group a sin (Shirer 1982:118). So, two very different attitudes can lie behind the hesitation to join the rhetorical feast; that of the marginalised outsider or that of the aloof Brahmin.

Smit is committed to Christian witness and also wants (sometimes) to speak in the Name of God. Whence then his hesitation? Can public theology as witness, confession and proclamation (kerugma) shun the forum, given that all these words are forensic in the broader or narrower sense? I suggest that the hesitation is itself rhetorical, Smit's way of entering the forum discreetly. For long some churches and theologians in South Africa specialised in authoritative, dogmatic pronouncements, often in the service of political power brokers. These pronouncements, quite apart from their gross insensitivity to marginalised outsiders, presented a closed case, leaving no room for the uncertainty of hope and God's future. The rhetoric spoke of a status quo of enclosed spaces, group areas, in which the purity of the Brahmin was ensured at a tragic cost for others. Yet, none knows better than Smit that the marginalised did take a stand, opposing to the status quo a *status confessionis* and saying authoritatively: "Jesus is Lord." When early Christians said this in the forum, their witness could make them martyrs, for some saw it as a confession of guilt. Some were served for dinner – to the lions – because they chose to serve their Lord rather than the emperor.

Perhaps, as Smit (2008:178f.) suggests regarding Barth, Christians are postmodern in that they reject the subject-object split. Though the danger of subjecting and objectifying others is real, I remain sceptical: the distinction between subject and object is entrenched in language. In another respect Christians cannot but be outsiders at the postmodern feast. Sooner or later, Christians have to take a stand and speak the dreaded words *arche* (of origin and authority), *telos* and Substance (for God, though more than the Substance of philosophers, is not less). They do so as humans among others in the milling forum, from within the flux of human language. If they refuse to resign themselves to the inevitability of flux, it is not because they have an Archimedean point beneath their feet, but because they are stretching forth their

¹⁵ In particular, theology does not have to make abstractions (power, ideology, discourse, et cetera), perform all sorts of unlikely actions. Wartenberg (1990:138f.) rightly sees this as a "fundamental flaw", a streak of mysticism, in Foucault.

necks (cf. Rom. 8:23) in hope towards the One who called and promised. For this they may have their necks stretched or cut through.

We probably still have no better guide to Christian rhetoric in this situation than the one provided by Paul in 2 Corinthians 36 and few better recent examples than the Belhar Confession (read with the Accompanying Letter). But did the latter persuade? To this day, the hands stretched forth in love have not been grasped by those to whom the appeal was primarily made. Even within URCSA the Confession often functions as a treasured possession, a relic to muster the community of faith, a paradigmatic grammatical exercise in the language of the group. Sadly, few necks from either side are stuck out today. Should we wistfully accept that “after Babel” our languages are inevitably and tragically confused and that eating our crackers in our cabins is the best we can do, thereby returning very precisely to what the Dutch Reformed Church had said years ago?

Smit’s hesitation, his virtuous scepticism, requires careful reading: he voices his doubts about entering a certain forum at that very forum. Smit the *dogmatikus* is also Smit the practical, wily rhetorician. First, Smit 1 stands squarely before us, vulnerable, somewhat nervous, even slightly naive. Next we are confronted by a series of tricky questions emanating from Smit 2, whose own position is not apparent. We have to fight it out with the spirits we have called (Wuellner, Schüssler Fiorenza, Foucault, and others) and that are now creating pandemonium in our ranks, those we thought we had swallowed and are now swallowing us. Rhetorical theorists, eager to include in the realm of rhetoric all disciplines, theology included, have not even arrived at consensus as to what rhetoric is and does! What concern is this of a *dogmatikus*?

It took me several readings to locate Smit 3 in the margins of the text, in the questions behind the questions, in the order of the presentation. He stands where he has always stood, humbly confident and never far from the Reformed tradition expressed so clearly in the Belhar Confession. Since the relative invisibility of Smit 3 in the article implies no theological shift, I take it to be a rhetorical move. He could, in the style of the Confession, have taken his stand both positively and in opposition to those rhetorical views that he would have to reject. He could have concluded with an explicitly appealing “accompanying letter”. Instead (as Smit 2), he directs his questions from all angles, leaving his audience to do the triangulation. Those who finally find him beyond the questions will meet someone very like Smit 1, but much less easy to dismiss casually. In this powerful statement lurks a powerful appeal – the appeal of the elusive, which reaches out by enticing others to reach out. Should those who fret about the rhetorical abuse of power complain that this is too subtle, are they not admitting that they respond only to forceful rhetoric?

Clearly much depends on who is being served for dinner. That rhetoric always explicitly or implicitly stands in the service of someone or something is a correct insight, not a new or profound one. A theory or method that told us unfailingly who is served by what rhetorical act would be profound – or perhaps merely positivistic. I’d say “rhetorical criticism is itself a rhetorical act”¹⁶ and leave it at that. But I also recognise that in rhetorical acts people can get

¹⁶ This amounts to the “rhetorical full turn” that Schüssler Fiorenza (1996:36) calls for, but it includes the warning that the “posture of scientific certainty” (1996:52) can invade ideological criticism and the hermeneutics of suspicion as well. The subsequent debate (Combrink 1999:29, Robbins 2002, Schüssler Fiorenza 2005, for instance) was sad rather than edifying. Without singling out persons, I append these remarks: Rhetoric invariably has an oppositional or adversarial aspect, but responsible rhetoric does not present a closed case: it appeals to the uncertainty of hope. The former is seen in the Belhar Confession,

eaten alive. Among peers this seldom matters much: those who take a bite out of you often incorporate something of your view and become to an extent consubstantial with you. What, though, of those who cannot, as academics obviously can, bite back? Should (and can) we save them from the voracious by incorporating them ourselves and then (re)presenting them, suitably digested, as items on the menu at our symposia?

It seems to me that the Bible (not rhetoric or hermeneutics) tells me that I should go as a lamb (not a plenipotentiary) among the wolves, as prey among predators. I seldom manage to serve God by serving myself up in this way. Dirk Smit has reminded me that Jesus provided the lambs with advice about protecting themselves: they should be innocent as the *dogmatici* and wily as the rhetoricians! Above all – this is built into the entire structure of the Bible – they should go in the uncertainty and security of hope – after Pentecost – reaching out in love because God’s love reached them first.

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the latter in the Accompanying Letter. Moreover, since “ethical interpretation” also involves responsibility towards one’s interlocutors (dead ones included), a certain “scientific” concern with accuracy cannot be eliminated. Finally, ethical discourse has to ask about its own “ulterior motives” lest it become an imposition (cf. Smit 2007b).

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