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Common Ground and Argument by Indirection in Two Seventeenth-Century Sermons

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ABSTRACT: Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's sermon to Louis XIV on the "Devoirs des rois" (1662) and John Donne's sermon to Queen Anne at Denmark House (1617) are both texts that offer indirect critiques of their royal audiences--critiques which, if stated more bluntly, might be politically dangerous to the respective speakers. What makes such oblique criticism "safe" and what ultimately makes it understood? The answer lies in the rhetor's ability to build common ground with the audience.

KEY WORDS: common ground, indirect argument, sermons, seventeenth century.

In his *Rhetoric of irony* (1974), the late Wayne Booth emphasized the capacity of 'stable' ironic discourse to forge a bond between rhetor and audience. By inviting the audience to 'decode' a consistent pattern of disguised meaning, the ironist suggests not only his own linguistic playfulness and the audience's ability to comprehend it, but also his assumption that he and his audience share a particular context and set of cultural values--in other words, a certain amount of common ground (pp. 28-29). Thus, in Voltaire's *Candide*, when the narrator placidly recounts how the Portuguese decide to hold an *auto-da-fe* as an 'infallible' way of preventing earthquakes, we immediately recognize the tone as ironic because of the lack of any logical connection between the burning of suspected heretics and a reduction in earthquakes. Furthermore, because we know that the *auto-da-fe* was once an actual practice, we also recognize that the absurdity of the narration implies a scathing attack on the Church for its intolerance. While in this example there might be a 'victim' excluded from the irony, either because he took the narration literally or because, as a member of the eighteenth-century clergy, he saw that the irony was at the expense of his own profession, there would nevertheless, according to Booth, be a far more significant effect of "communing with kindred spirits" (p. 28), many of whom would take comfort in not being the only ones to recognize the absurd brutality of burning heretics at the stake.

But does the ability to forge the bonds of community through indirection belong to irony alone? To what extent can we speak of a 'communing' between rhetor and audience in the case of arguments that do not use irony, but that are nonetheless indirect? These are the questions I would like to consider today in examining two examples of religious discourse, both by clergymen who also happened to be among the greatest prose stylists of the seventeenth century. The first is Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's "Sermon sur les devoirs des rois" ("Sermon on the duties of kings"), given before Louis XIV on April 2,

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1662; the second is John Donne's "A Sermon Preached to Queen Anne, at Denmarke-House. December 14, 1617."

Given that, in both cases, the speakers express ideas which could be dangerous if stated more bluntly, it will be helpful to consider our two examples in relation to the ancient rhetorical practice of "safe criticism."[1] In contrast with *parrhesia*, or what Foucault was later to term 'fearless speech,'[2] "safe criticism" involves disguising or "'figuring' language in the interests of tact and safety" (Ahl, 1984, p. 175). The rationale behind such 'veiled' discourse is not only that expressing oneself too bluntly might be harmful in some way to the speaker or writer (for example, in the case of a speaker, criticizing the actions of a tyrant to his face), but that it might also be 'ineffective' because the target of the criticism might cease paying attention altogether. Unlike certain forms of irony which may have 'victims' who are 'excluded' from its community, the art of indirect criticism involves, above all, the desire to make its arguments without alienating anyone, most especially, the intended target of the criticism. Building common ground, then, is not only a by-product of recognizing the indirection itself, but is essential to keeping the criticism, and the person advancing it, 'safe'.

How, then, does 'figured speech' build common ground? In analyzing the following examples of indirection in our two texts, I shall consider first how explicit schemes of argument suggest a seemingly innocuous surface reading, and then how more hidden schemes are at work in creating a 'veiled' and more 'dangerous' reading. In each case, stylistic devices play a strong role in creating the second reading, as well as building the communal bond between rhetor and audience which allows the criticism to 'pass'.

BOSSUET'S "SERMON SUR LES DEVOIRS DES ROIS"

As the last in a series of Lenten sermons delivered over a two-month period, "Sermon sur les devoirs des rois" was far from being, as it has often been characterized, a mere apology for the divine right of kings. While Bossuet does indeed at one point refer to kings as 'dieux' (gods), the sermon also contains many less flattering allusions to the Bourbon monarchy. The treatment of such themes as the church's authority over the monarchy and the king's political inexperience is what prompted Jacques Truchet to characterize it as the most politically audacious of the 1662 Lenten sermons (1960, p. 233). This is, in fact, an extraordinary statement when we consider the context of the Lenten sermons as a whole. Invited by the king's mother, Anne of Austria, Bossuet had been charged with the task of warning the 23-year-old king away from a life of excessive pleasure. In the previous sermons, he had already made repeated references to the king's extra-marital affair with Louise de Lavallière and his dangerous neglect of the mass starvation that had beset a large portion of the realm, including Paris itself. Now, he would have, in the Scriptural text of the final sermon ("Tell Zion's daughter, 'See, your king is coming to you, gentle and mounted on a donkey . . . '"; Matthew 21.5), the most obvious means of reminding the king of his proper duties.

Although there are numerous examples of indirection throughout the sermon, for the purposes of this analysis, I shall focus only on the first two paragraphs. The sermon

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[1] I borrow this term from F. Ahl.

[2] Foucault's remarks in the posthumous *Fearless speech* (2001) are not based on his own notes but on those of a student who attended a series of lectures in English that he gave at Berkeley in 1983.

opens with contrasting descriptions of royal entries into cities. First, we hear of how the Roman emperors made their entrance:

> Parmi toutes les grandeurs du monde, il n'y a rien de si éclatant qu'un jour de triomphe; et j'ai appris de Tertullien que ces illustres triomphateurs de l'ancienne Rome marchaient avec tant de pompe, que, de peur qu'étant éblouis d'une telle magnificence, ils ne s'élevassent enfin au-dessus de la condition humaine, un esclave qui les suivait avait charge de les avertir qu'ils étaient hommes: *Respice post te, hominem memento te*. (Cagnat-Deboeuf, 2001, p. 231)[3]

By contrast,

> Le triomphe de mon Sauveur est bien éloigné de cette gloire; et, au lieu de l'avertir qu'il est homme, je me sens plutôt pressé de le faire souvenir qu'il est Dieu. Il semble en effet qu'il l'a oublié. Le prophète et l'évangéliste concourent à nous montrer ce roi d'Israël monté, disent-ils, "sur une ânesse, sedens super asinam". (Cagnat-Deboeuf, 2001, p. 231)[4]

Reacting to this unglamorous depiction of Christ and adopting the voice of a skeptic, Bossuet then introduces the following prolepsis:

> Chrétiens, qui n'en rougirait? Est-ce là une entrée royale? est-ce là un appareil de triomphe? Est-ce ainsi, ô fils de David, que vous montez au trône de vos ancêtres et prenez possession de leur couronne?[5]

But he quickly corrects this erroneous impression that might call the authenticity of Christ's kingship into question by offering a revised description of the divine king:

> Toutefois arrêtons, mes Frères, et ne précipitons pas notre jugement. Ce roi, que tout le peuple honore aujourd'hui par ses cris de réjouissance, ne vient pas pour s'élever au-dessus des hommes par l'éclat d'une vaine pompe, mais plutôt pour fouler aux pieds les grandeurs humaines; et les sceptres rejetés, l'honneur méprisé, toute la gloire du monde anéantie font le plus grand ornement de son triomphe. (Cagnat-Deboeuf, 2001, pp. 231-232)[6]

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[3] Among all the grandeurs of the world, there is nothing more magnificent than a day of triumph; and I learned from Tertullian that these illustrious victors of ancient Rome walked with such pomp that, fearing, in their awe of such magnificence, they might elevate themselves above the rank of humans, a slave would follow them who had the charge of reminding them that they were men.

[4] The triumph of my Savior is well removed from this glory; and, instead of reminding him that he is a man, I feel impelled, rather, to make him remember that he is God. It seems, in fact, that he has forgotten it. The prophet and the evangelist concur in showing us this king of Israel mounted, they say, "on a donkey, sedens super asinam".

[5] Christians, who wouldn't blush at this? Do we have there a royal entry? Do we have there the appearance of triumph? Is it thus, o son of David, that you ascend the throne of your ancestors and take possession of their crown?

[6] Yet let us pause, my Brothers, and let us not precipitate our judgment. This king, whom all people honor today by their cries of joy, comes not to exalt himself above men by the magnificence of empty pomp, but

Finally, with this much more glorious vision of Christ in his triumph over worldly grandeurs, Bossuet offers a conclusion for his audience:

> Donc, pour admirer cette entrée, apprenons avant toutes choses à nous dépouiller de l'ambition et à mépriser les grandeurs du monde. (Cagnat-Deboeuf, 2001, p. 232)[7]

Thus, by moving from two antithetical models of kingship--one pagan, one Christian; to a proleptic voice that calls the Christian model into question; to a correction of the mistaken questioning of the Christian model; to the conclusion that it is the pagan model that must be rejected, Bossuet has overturned the belief that kingship must be associated with pompous ceremony. By redefining (true) kingship as a rejection of worldly honors, he has dissociated it from the (false) Roman model of kingship. The argument appears, in this reading, then, to be a general call to all Christians--i.e., the entire audience--to shun worldly honors.

But, when we consider that the description of Roman pomp would likely have evoked the recent memory of Louis XIV's own triumphant entrance into Paris after his marriage in 1660 (Cagnat-Deboeuf, 2001, p. 370), the argumentation becomes an indirect reproach of the king: by being identified with the Romans, Louis XIV is not conducting himself according to Christian standards, and hence, does not practice 'true' kingship. Yet, while this unflattering implication could be potentially alienating once 'decoded' by the king, there are also mitigating elements that work to build common ground so that this criticism can be tolerated. For example, the use of the first-person pronoun ("mon sauveur"), while seeming to refer only to Bossuet, also could suggest the perspective of the king, for whom Christ is just as much a 'sauveur'. Additionally, Bossuet adopts what might likely be the king's point of view when he introduces the proleptic objection which we saw earlier:

> Chrétiens, qui n'en rougirait? Est-ce là une entrée royale? est-ce là un appareil de triomphe? Est-ce ainsi, ô fils de David, que vous montez au trône de vos ancêtres et prenez possession de leur couronne?

The use of "nous" not only implies that Bossuet and the king share the same point of view but also suggests a collective self-correction that includes both Bossuet and the king. Thus, while the king would recognize the magnificence of his own court in the Roman example, he would also be able to simultaneously identify himself with "Christians" in general, and hence, would not be entirely excluded from the possibility of practicing the Christian kingship to which the Roman one is opposed.

DONNE'S "SERMON PREACHED TO QUEEN ANNE, AT DENMARKE-HOUSE"

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rather to trample human grandeurs under foot; and the rejected scepters, scorned honor, the entire glory of the world annihilated make up the greatest ornament of his triumph.

[7] Therefore, to admire this entrance, let us learn above all things to strip ourselves of ambition and to scorn the grandeurs of the world.

Four decades before Bossuet gave "Devoirs des rois," John Donne found himself in an equally awkward situation in 1617 preaching before Anne of Denmark, the wife of James I of England. Although Donne had already achieved success as a poet, it was at the age of 43 and under pressure from the king that, in 1615, he decided to take holy orders in the Church of England. Donne had been raised a Catholic but, at some point during his early adulthood, he had converted and even went on to write strongly anti-Catholic tracts, such as the *Psuedo-Martyr* (1610) and *Ignatius his conclave* (1611). As P. McCullough notes, this background made Donne the preacher most suited to address Queen Anne on the subject of her secret Catholicism (1998, p. 182). Even though she had been born into a Lutheran family, while living with James in Scotland in the 1590s, Anne had come under the influence of certain prominent Catholics in the service of the king. The most notable display of her non-allegiance to the Church of England came when she refused to take communion at her husband's coronation in 1603. Donne's task, then, was to advise the Queen of her duty to worship as an Anglican.

Based on Proverbs 8.17 ("I love them that love me, and they that seek me early shall find me"), the sermon is ostensibly about what the affection of 'love' means in the text (part 1) and the blessedness of enjoying that love (part 2). Despite the sermon's title, nowhere in the text of the sermon does Donne ever make specific reference to the Queen. Nevertheless, in the first two paragraphs of part 2, we find ample evidence of oblique criticism directed at Anne. The first of these paragraphs is where I would now like to focus your attention. The first sentence of part 2 begins with the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene who laments the disappearance of Christ, whose body has been taken away from her:

> *Tulerunt Dominum meum*, They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him; this was one strain of Mary Magdalens lamentation, when she found not her Saviour in the monument: It is a lamentable case to be fain to cry so, *Tulerunt*, They have taken, other men have taken away Christ, by a dark and corrupt education, which was the state of our Fathers to the Roman captivity.

In this first stage of the argument in paragraph 1, we see how Donne uses Scripture as the basis for an analogy: just as Christ's body was literally taken away from Mary Magdalene ('*Tulerunt*'), so "other men" (i.e., Catholics) have figuratively taken away Christ through a "dark and corrupt education" (i.e., the propagation of Catholicism). Then, Donne shifts the discussion to that of an even greater harm than having Christ snatched away from you by others ('*Tulerunt*'):

> But when the *abjecerunt Dominum*, which is so often complained of by God in the Prophets, is pronounced against thee, when thou hast had Christ offered to thee, by the motions of his grace, and seal'd to thee by his Sacraments, and yet wilt cast him so far from thee, that thou knowest not where to find him, when thou hast poured him out at thine eyes in prophane and counterfeit tears, which should be thy souls rebaptization for thy sins, when thou hast blown him away in corrupt and ill intended sighs, which should be *gemitus columbae*, the voice of the Turtle, to sound thy peace and reconciliation with thy God; yea when thou hast spit him out of thy mouth in execrable and blasphemous oathes; when thou hast not only

> cast him so far, as that thou knowest not where to find him, but hast made so ordinary and so indifferrent a thing of sin, as thou knowest not when thou didst lose him, no nor dost not remember that ever thou hadst him; no, nor doest not know that there is any such man, as *Dominus tuus*, a Jesus, that is, thy Lord; The *Tulerunt* is dangerous, when others hide Christ from thee; but the *Abjecerunt* is desperate, when thou thy self doest cast him away.

The overall argument pattern in the two passages suggests one similar to Aristotle's *topos* of "the more, the less" in Book 2 of the *Rhetoric* (Kennedy, 1991, 2.22.1379b): if the consequences of "*Tulerunt*" are serious, how much more so are those of "*Abjecerunt*," or those who would push Christ away themselves. Reinforcing this pattern is not only the grammatical parallelism of the verbal forms, '*Tulerunt*' and '*Abjecerunt*' (both in the third-person, plural, perfect form), but also the augmentative logic of the increasing number of syllables in the two verbs (3 + 4).

Another shift that occurs in the second passage, commensurate with the increase in gravity that the argumentative pattern implies, is a shift in pronouns. While the previous paragraph was dominated by the third person ('They'), now we move to the more direct and intimate 'thee' and 'thou'. The shift occurs as Donne suggests a potential situation in which "*abjecerunt Dominum* . . . has been pronounced against thee," and then, what follows is a long series of actions that the anonymous 'thou' may have committed. The parallelism of these actions ("when thou hast had . . ., ; when thou hast poured him out . . . ; when thou hast blown him away . . . ; yea when thou hast spit him out . . .; when thou hast not only cast him . . . ") and the use of anaphora ("when . . . ") lend a particular vehemence to the tone. A superficial reading of the argument here would simply be as a warning to the congregation about the dangers of neglecting religious duty (refusing Christ "when thou hast had [him] offered to thee"; shedding "prophane and counterfeit tears"; heaving "ill intended sighs"; committing blasphemy; and becoming indifferent to sin).

As McCullough (1998) and Lunderberg (2004) have already pointed out, however, when we consider these remarks within the context of Anne's refusal to accept Anglicanism, the allusions to her particular case become unmistakable. Hence, the references to the "dark and corrupt education" by which "other men have taken away Christ" attacks Anne's Catholicism. Even more pointedly, the list of accusations which Donne launches against the unnamed 'thou' suggest Anne's refusal to take communion ("when thou hast had Christ offered to thee, . . "), her feigned devotion at Church ("prophane and counterfeit tears"), her continued love of Catholicism ("corrupt and ill intended sighs"), and her private Catholic worship ("execrable and blasphemous oathes"). When we consider these references, it is hard to imagine a more directly expressed set of charges against Anne, even if she is never named..

Given the emotional force of this criticism, where. we wonder, might we find attempts to soften it, especially by building common ground between the speaker and the audience? Do we detect, as we did in the case of Bossuet, attempts on the part of Donne to establish a bond with Anne? We see no use of the first-person plural pronoun ('we') as we did in Bossuet's implied reproach of Louis XIV; we also see no attempt at using prolepsis to adopt the audience's point of view. What we do see, however, is how Donne grounds his critique of the Queen in Scripture, namely in the biblical figure of Mary

Magdalene. The fact that he refers to a female figure at all suggests immediately that Donne would like to gain Anne's attention. But the choice of this particular figure is nteresting not only because of her sinful past but because of her later repentance and conversion through Christ. The allusion to Mary Magdalene thus implies that the Queen may still repent and become a heroic figure with respect to the Church. Moreover, by focusing on the episode of "*Tulerunt Dominum meum*" (John 20.13), Donne presents the reformed female sinner as a victim, and hence, implies that he has sympathy for her.

CONCLUSION

I began this paper by discussing Booth's characterization of irony as a rhetorical technique that could build 'communion' with an audience and even create new communities because of the implied complicity between the ironist and his audience. Booth developed these ideas in direct reaction to those who accused irony of being an elitist and potentially divisive practice. The art of 'safe' criticism has always had its share of detractors as well, especially those who would equate it with moral cowardice because of its failure to state its points bluntly. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, it is effectiveness that is the 'safe' critic's primary concern: a speaker stands no chance of being effective if he alienates his audience. For this reason, building common ground with the target of criticism is essential to the indirect speaker, and this is precisely what we have just seen occur in our two examples. But, unlike the ironist building new communities, 'safe' criticism is much more a question of reinforcing the values of an existing community. In this sense, both Bossuet and Donne are attempting to call the targets of their indirect reproaches into compliance with specific communal values: as a member of the Christian community, Louis XIV must learn to scorn human grandeurs, and as a member of the Anglican community, Queen Anne must cease her secret practice of Catholicism. Thus, both preachers are trying to pull their respective targets back into a community from which they have strayed; what better way to bring these targeted listeners back than to remind them of their connections to that community?

link to commentary

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