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Argument by Anecdote

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ABSTRACT: Argumentation textbooks typically dismiss the anecdote as an inferior type of evidence. We argue that it deserves more serious attention because it serves three important purposes: (1) Anecdotes function as synecdoches capable of revealing insights unobtainable through statistical norms. (2) Their narrative form lends vivacity and presence to an argument. (3) They often enact or portray the arguer's character. Anecdotes, then, coordinate evidentiary, representational, narrative and ethotic elements of argumentation and are not always trivial.

KEYWORDS: anecdote, ethotic argument, narrative, representation, synecdoche

1. ANECDOTES IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CAMPAIGN DISCOURSE: ARE THEY ARGUMENTS?

During the first U.S. Presidential Debate of 2004, moderator Jim Lehrer directed this question to President George Bush: "Has the war in Iraq been worth the cost of American lives 1052 as of today?" Bush responded as follows:

You know, every life is precious. Every life matters. You know, my hardest — the hardest part of the job is to know that I committed the troops in harm's way and then do the best I can to provide comfort for the loved ones who lost a son or a daughter or a husband or wife. You know, I think about Missy Johnson. She's a fantastic lady I met in Charlotte, North Carolina. She and her son Bryan, they came to see me. Her husband PJ got killed. He'd been in Afghanistan, went to Iraq. You know, it's hard work to try to love her as best as I can, knowing full well that the decision I made caused her loved one to be in harm's way. I told her after we prayed and teared up and laughed some that I thought her husband's sacrifice was noble and worthy. Because I understand the stakes of this war on terror. I understand that we must find Al Qaida wherever they hide. We must deal with threats before they fully materialize. And Saddam Hussein was a threat, and that we must spread liberty because in the long run, the way to defeat hatred and tyranny and oppression is to spread freedom. Missy understood that. That's what she told me her husband

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understood. So you say, “Was it worth it?” Every life is precious. That’s what distinguishes us from the enemy. Everybody matters. But I think it’s worth it, Jim.¹

A little less than four years later, Hilary Rodham Clinton addressed the Democratic National Convention in a speech that endorsed Barack Obama and urged her followers to campaign on his behalf. Among other things, she recalled her own campaign for the presidential nomination and noted some special moments she had experienced:

I will always remember that single mother who had adopted two kids with autism. She didn’t have any health insurance; and she discovered that she had cancer. But she greeted me her bald head, painted with my name on it, and asked me to fight for health care for her and her children. I will always remember the young man in a Marine Corps t-shirt who waited months for medical care, and he said to me, ‘Take care of my buddies. A lot of them are still over there.’ And then, ‘Will you please take care of me.’ And I will always remember that young boy who told me his mom worked for minimum wage, that her employer had cut her hours. He said he just didn’t know what his family was going to do.

Clinton then turned to a consideration of the policy issues she had advocated during the campaign, but ends her list of specific issues with these comments:

Most of all I ran to stand up for all those who have been invisible to their government for eight long years. Those are the reasons I ran for President, and those are the reasons I support Barack Obama for President. I want you to ask yourselves: Were you in this campaign just for me? Or were you in it for that young Marine and others like him? Were you in it for that mom struggling with cancer while raising her kids? Were you in it for the young boy and his mom surviving on the minimum wage? Were you in it for all the people in this country who feel invisible?²

In both of these instances, an important American political leader addresses a crucial issue by means of anecdote. And for those who follow American politics, this tactic hardly seems unusual or inappropriate, since over three past decades the anecdote has become a common and thoroughly familiar instrument in the American rhetorical toolbox.

Many scholars, however, might find this development curious and perhaps even disturbing. Modern philosophers, logicians, and social scientists have long regarded the anecdote as a weak and rather tawdry form of argument. Voltaire (as cited in Todd, 1979, p. 297) summed up this attitude when he dismissed the anecdote as an unsophisticated effort to substitute concrete details in place of public generalities, and the Goncourt brothers (1904) expressed a similar view when they called the anecdote the “dime store of history” (p. 13). Moreover, social scientists, when evaluating forms of evidence, routinely refer to the “merely anecdotal” as something unscholarly, unscientific, or trivial.

Among informal logicians, the anecdote receives scant attention, and when it is noticed, it gets no respect. Typically it is treated as the dubious companion of fallacious reasoning connected with hasty generalizations or conclusions. Thus, in their influential text, *Logical Self-Defense*, Johnson and Blair (2006) maintain that: “Evidence is

¹This anecdote is taken from the transcript of the first Presidential Debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry on September 30, 2004 at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida.

² This anecdote is taken from the transcript of Hilary Clinton’s Keynote Address on August 26, 2008 at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado.

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anecdotal, as contrasted with systematic, when it takes the form of recounting an experience, often in story form, of one or a few people” (p. 70). And they caution that a conclusion drawn from single instances is not only logically dubious but also dangerous since it tempts arguers to use a story to prove a thesis rather than to illustrate one that is already established through more rigorous kinds of reasoning. In an equally influential argumentation text, Trudy Govier (1996) offers an equally dim view of anecdotal evidence, when she comments that it “is about only a single episode, or only a few episodes, often from within the personal experience of the arguer. Such evidence is too slight to be the basis for a cogent inductive generalization. The condition of cogency is not satisfied when evidence is purely anecdotal” (pp. 338-339).

Among rhetoricians, there is a more complicated tale to tell about the anecdote. Through most of the rhetorical tradition, the anecdote has held a marginal and equivocal status; it is sometimes regarded as a species of argument by example (see Lanham 1991, 193) and sometimes classified as a “medium-sized” form of narrative (Corbett and Eberly 2000, pp. 64-65). Viewed from either of these perspectives, the anecdote assumes a modest place within rhetorical lore. But when the two perspectives are combined, something altogether more important comes into view. Situated in the unstable ground between induction and narrative, the anecdote assumes a rhetorically productive ambiguity. Both a story that instantiates a principle and an instance that supports a generalization, the anecdote is not an example or a story but an exemplification—a representation that dances back and forth across the boundary between argument and narrative.

Extending and adapting this representational aspect of anecdote, Kenneth Burke has developed his strikingly original and extremely influential concept of the “representative anecdote.” For Burke all human vocabularies that seek to describe reality are necessarily “selections of reality” (1969, p. 59), and these selections are representations. They are reductions that use something relatively specific and concrete to stand in for something more general and abstract, and, in his terminology, these representations are anecdotes. Moreover, since the representation moves from part to whole, the anecdote becomes a kind of synecdoche. Thus, for example, Burke maintains that the Behaviourist uses “experiments with conditioned reflex as the anecdote about which to form his vocabulary about human motives” (p. 59). But this not a truly representative anecdote because an account of human motives based on animal behaviour does not encompass the role of language, which is a crucial part of the human experience, and hence the part (the anecdote) lacks the scope needed to account for the whole. And Burke argues that the behaviourist synecdoche should be replaced by using “drama” as the representative anecdote for generating a vocabulary about human motives.

As this brief summary indicates, Burke’s representative anecdote is a complex, multi-faceted concept that is in part a philosophical argument, in part a method for analyzing and assessing discursive formations, and in part a strategy for making arguments. Contemporary rhetoricians generally have seized upon the second of these possibilities and have produced “countless convention papers and published essays” (Jasinski 2001, p. 493) describing or deploying the representative anecdote as a critical method. Used in this way

the anecdote need not have been explicitly uttered in the discourse under analysis. Instead the anecdote is [...] a lens, filter or template through which the critic studies and reconstructs the discourse (Brummett 1984, p. 163).

Our interest, however, is to study the third option Burke opens for us and to consider the anecdote as a strategy available to arguers and that may be understood as something more interesting and useful than its typical treatment as evidence supporting generalization. For this purpose, we want to exploit the ambiguity between narrative and induction implied in the rhetorical tradition and draw upon the explicit emphasis on representation found in Burke.

Borrowing and adapting Burke's terminology, we regard the anecdote as a kind of rhetorical synecdoche that offers a substantive rather than a statistical representation. That is, it tells a story that invites the hearer or reader to grasp the whole of some subject through an insight that is more inclusive and engaging than anything a generalized proposition could provide. Our intention is to support this position anecdotally—by close analysis of the two passages we quoted at the beginning of this paper, the one from George W. Bush, the other from Hilary Clinton. We need to add a word of caution, however, before engaging this task. These texts, consistent with our own research interests, both fall squarely within the genre of American political campaign rhetoric, and as such they have certain distinctive features that are less prominent in other forms of argumentative discourse. Most notably, campaign rhetoric focuses upon the person of the candidate, and so it places stress on what Aristotle calls "ethos" and what Alan Brinton has usefully renamed "ethotic" argument, and in recent decades, American political discourse has tended to center much more intensely and directly on persons rather than issues, and so the "ethotic" dimension takes on an especially critical role. Our conception of anecdotal argument is conditioned by this object of study, and this is reflected in the definition we have formulated of our key concept, which is: The rhetorical anecdote is a short narrative-based strategy that selects and arranges salient parts of actions and events to represent and make arguments for the whole of a candidate's character or policy positions while simultaneously promoting the identification of the candidate with the audience.

2. BUSH ON THE IRAQ WAR

This question posed by the moderator is especially sensitive and potentially difficult for Bush because of intense criticism by commentators who had noted that, throughout the duration of the Iraq war, Bush had not attended a single U.S. soldier's funeral. Bush's anecdotal response seems calculated to blunt and deflect his critics through a performative sequence that constructs a part for whole pattern and that coaches the audience to view Bush's character as whole from one perspective while it blocks or displaces other perspective. That is to say, upon hearing about a single narrative that moves through a series of part for whole progressions, the auditor is invited to regard Bush's meeting with the widow of a fallen soldier as an accurate representation of his attitudes and his character. Four primary synecdoches are evident in this anecdote; rhetorically they operate on representational and ethotic argumentative levels. First, Missy Johnson's husband's sacrifice becomes a representative memorial (part) for the 1052 soldiers who have died (whole) in the hard work of spreading freedom in Iraq. We

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might add that Bush uses the euphemistic metonymy of “harm’s way.” In reducing and substituting “harm’s way” for the lethal chaos of war, Bush not only diminishes the severity of war but he also, through this strategic sugar coating, establishes a eulogistic and comforting tone.

Secondly, Missy herself becomes the representative figure or spokesperson for the collective families who have lost a loved one in Iraq, and in the course of this representation, two synecdochic sub-texts are at work. First, Missy husband’s death is reduced to “got killed.” Notice Bush does not go into the details about how he died, where, under what circumstances, or who is responsible. PJ Johnson is seen, much like his wife, as a passive victim of a war that seems to move through it own inertia and that surpasses even the President’s ability to control. Secondly, Missy Johnson’s entire bereavement process is reduced to praying, tearing up, and laughing. The under girding prescription here is that Missy is dealing with the loss that comes with war and so should you. Collective America is encouraged to believe that the people who have lost a loved one in Iraq react, or at least should react, in this same patriotic spirit.

Third, the death of Missy Johnson’s husband PJ becomes socialized and naturalized under the mytho-poetic banners of “duty,” “liberty,” “sacrifice,” and “freedom.” By contrast, Saddam Hussein (whom the Bush administration had erroneously connected to Al Qaida) becomes a metonymic scapegoat. He serves as the symbolic conduit, the “producer for the product,” not only for Iraq as a whole nation, but also as the supra-historical embodiment of hatred, tyranny, and oppression. Saddam as the embodiment of evil and terrorism fits neatly into the Manichean orientation by which Bush attempts to condense all matters. Implicitly tied to Al Qaida, Saddam is constituted as a harbinger of hatred, tyranny, and oppression—the counteragent to freedom and liberty.

Finally, Bush’s self-representation performs a synecdochic function. Having been criticized for failing to attend a single U.S. soldier’s funeral, Bush must construct an anecdote that demonstrates a representative view (“the hardest part of the job”) of how he consoles family members who have lost loved ones in Iraq. He rhetorically executes this through the manipulation of pronouns not only reveal his character but also depict America’s collective affirmation for the Iraq war. A noticeable shift occurs from Bush as the autonomous agent “I,” to the collective “we” of America occurs precisely at the moment that Bush defends his decision to go to war itself. “Because I understand the stakes of this war on terror. I understand that *we* must find Al Qaida where they hide. *We* must deal with threats before they fully materialize...*we* must spread liberty, because in the long run, the way to defeat hatred and tyranny and oppression is to spread freedom. That’s what distinguishes *us* from the enemy.”

Missy and her dead husband become spokespersons for this collective “we” who, like Bush, understand the need for sacrifice. Whatever divergent attitudes exist about the war, Bush’s management of it, or the lack of comfort he has provided to families of the dead are all swept under the verbal rug and subsumed within Missy’s synecdochic testimony. Consequently, the Johnsons function in a way similar to Burke’s description of Rousseau’s concept of *volonté générale*—as a conscious understanding that represents the wills of all members of a society (1969, p. 508). Bush conjoins the inclusive and representational power of synecdoche with the transcendent “we,” in an attempt to manufacture consent for the war.

In sum, Bush's anecdote makes an ethotic argument by illustrating how he deals with the families of the fallen. Alan Brinton (1986) defines ethotic argument as a line of reasoning, or an argumentative technique in which ethos is invoked, attended to, or represented in such a way as to lend credibility to conclusions which are being drawn (p. 246). In this rather short passage, Bush achieves this goal through an anecdote that incorporates a range of rhetorical elements, including concrete evidence, narrative, and synecdoche, that coalesce to form a unified and positive representation of the President's conduct and attitudes.

3. HILARY CLINTON ENDORSES OBAMA

Senator Clinton faced an entirely different rhetorical problem. Speaking to the Democratic National Convention on the eve of her opponent's nomination, Clinton's audience, both seated on the convention floor and watching on television, included large numbers of her supporters, many of whom were still angered by the fate of their candidate and reluctant to accept the presumptive nominee. National polls indicated that a considerable percentage of Clinton voters were so disaffected that they intended either not to vote or to vote for the Republican candidate. Delegates on the floor expressed their desire to continue the battle to the bitter end, and a group calling themselves pumas (party unity my ass) threatened to walk out on Obama. Moreover the situation was complicated by the history of the campaign. Clinton had refuse to withdraw from the primary contests long after it was apparent that she had little or no chance of winning and had repeatedly constructed an image for herself as a fighter who would not back down even against the most formidable odds. How then could she credibly withdraw and endorse Obama without tarnishing her own image and how could she use her credibility to bring her supporters along with her?

The speech begins with an unequivocal endorsement of Obama and contextualizes that endorsement in terms of a "fight" metaphor. It is time, Clinton affirms, for those on both sides to join the same team, since the upcoming election is a "fight" for the future and a "fight" requiring common effort. Clinton explains that she has not served in the "trenches" thirty-five years as an advocate for children and universal health care or joined in the "fight" for women's rights to stand on the sidelines and watch the Republicans retain the White House for another four years. Thus, events have come to the point where it is necessary to close ranks and fight a common enemy (McCain).

The speech rapidly shifts from the present act of endorsement to a recollection about the campaign, and Clinton includes three anecdotal moments indelibly sketched in her memory: (1) the woman suffering from cancer who asked the Senator to help her and her adopted children, (2) the Marine who asked Clinton to help his buddies "still out there" and to help him get medical care, and (3) a young boy who was worried about his mom and his family. Setting the anecdotes aside for the moment, Clinton remembers two notable Democrats who died during the campaign and then recalls a long list specific issues that had informed her campaign. And as the list ends, she encapsulates her efforts in a way that brings us back to the anecdotes she recounted earlier and her initial endorsement of Obama.

Most of all, Clinton affirms, her identity as a candidate arises not in respect to issues but in her determination to stand up for Americans who are invisible to the current

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government; that is why she ran for the president and why she now supports Obama. Shifting in the next paragraph from the “I” to the “you,” she asks her supporters why they joined the campaign. Surely, they did so not “just for me,” but for those invisible others she had recalled in her anecdotes—the mother with cancer, the Marine needing help, and boy whose family was struggling make ends meet.

Clinton’s argument has cycled back to its origins and has provided concrete links between herself and Obama and concrete reasons for her supporters who fought for her to do as she is now doing, which is to fight for Obama. In fact, each of the anecdotes unobtrusively reinforces the idea of collaborative effort and the need to maintain concern for the other and not just for oneself. The mother with cancer seeks help for her children; the Marine’s first request comes out of concern for his buddies, and the young boy fears for his whole family. So also, in effect, does Clinton ask her followers to restrain their personal sentiments and needs and to work for others who need help—and Obama, in an important sense, is one of those others, since he must have their help if he is to help the invisible people who are the main reason that Clinton and her supporters entered into the electoral battle.

Clinton continues the speech by further developing identification between herself and her cause and the Obama candidacy. She returns to the key issues and indicates that Obama holds the same positions that she does. And she also turns to the negative side of the equation, arguing that McCain and Bush are indistinguishable in so many respects that a vote for McCain in effect is a vote to prolong the bitter years of the Bush presidency. So there are both positive, abstract reasons and negative, concrete reasons to join the team with Obama. But at least one critical element in Clinton’s appeal consists in arguments based on anecdotes, and it is in terms of those stories, those representations of Democratic Party commitments, that we find the most distinctive and powerful link between the two former opponents. The anecdotes vividly bring to mind the genuine causes for which Clinton battles, and they also best explain her transformation from candidate in her own right to the ally of another candidate. The stories help to form a larger narrative where Clinton’s transformation is not from a fighter to a passive follower but where she shifts position in order to continue the fight as new conditions demand. Her ethos as fighter remains intact, and those who admire her character are now called to emulate it by changing so that they may keep on fighting the same battles. The rhetorical alchemy represents a character that is constant in its essential aspects but flexible in its choice of means and its ability to accommodate to the shifting political circumstances.

4. CONCLUSION

We have supported our claims anecdotally with examples from the political campaign rhetoric of George W. Bush and Hilary Clinton. In both cases, these rhetors faced very different rhetorical situations, but both relied on the anecdote’s representational and persuasive power to work the space between induction and narration and to blend evidentiary and ethotic arguments. Bush did so through a chain of part for whole portrayals in an attempt to justify the loss of life in the Iraq war and to establish a positive self-representation. Clinton wove three vivid anecdotes into an extended “fight” metaphor to persuade her followers to join her in endorsing Obama. Such a move allowed her to

preserve her fighter identity while successfully maintaining her cause of helping invisible Americans—arguing that her cause was Obama’s cause.

In sum, we have argued that the status and function of anecdotal evidence is in need of reassessment. As opposed to the normative way in which anecdotes are treated in argumentation theory as insufficient forms of evidence that lead to fallacious generalizations, our goal is to demonstrate that they may perform important rhetorical and dialectical tasks. The anecdote, as we conceive it, may function as a complex, condensed argumentative strategy that coordinates evidentiary, representational (synecdochic), narrative, and ethotic elements. It has the special capacity to link perception of an arguer and his or her claims in a holistic insight that reaches beyond the possibilities of propositional argument. But while it is not a strictly propositional form of argument, we hope to have shown that it can and sometimes does act in a rationally acceptable manner. If this is the case, then the anecdote should have a more respectable place in argumentation theory and pedagogy—a place that would give better recognition to its effectiveness in the practice of lawyers and politicians. And we can find no better evidence of its effectiveness than in recollections of Abraham Lincoln’s rhetoric, for as one his contemporaries remarked: “I tell you he got more arguments out of stories than he did out of law books, and the queer part was you couldn’t answer ‘em—they just made you see it and you couldn’t get around it” (p. 9).

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