ISSA Proceedings 1998 – The Argument Ad Hominem In An Interactional Perspective

My general contention is that *argument ad hominem* can be viewed as an integral part of ordinary argumentation, and more specifically, of polemical discussions and debates. Departing from the definition of ad hominem as an informal fallacy, this paper analyzes it as a component of the argumentative interaction between orator, addressee and opponent. It draws on a few contemporary theories stressing the importance of rhetorical interaction rather than of mere logical validity. In this framework, argument ad hominem is examined in relation both to the status and to the image (*ethos*) of the opponent and of the proponent.
I will try to briefly outline this approach while discussing its main sources, in particular van Eemeren and Grootendorst's pragma-dialectical treatment of the argument ad hominem, and Brinton's "ethotic argument". Theoretical principles will then be exemplified by a case study, namely, Julien Benda's open letter to Romain Rolland, which is a protest against Rolland's appeal for understanding and peace during World War I.

Argument ad hominem: a short theoretical survey
As emphasized in historical surveys of the notion (Hamblin 1970,van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1993, Nuchelmans 1993), the expression argument ad hominem refers to various argumentative phenomena that have to be sorted out before proceeding to any further reflection. The main distinction is the one clearly drawn by Gabriel Nuchelmans between arguments ex concessis "based on propositions which have been conceded by the adversary" (1993:38), and proofs or refutation focussing on the person rather than on the matter of the case. In order to avoid confusion, the latter has sometimes been called *argumentum ad personam* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1970). We shall however stick to the argumentum ad hominem as an argument directed toward the person of the speaker (and not as a premiss admitted by a specific audience).

"According to modern tradition an argument ad hominem is committed when a

case is argued not on its merits but by analysing (usually unfavourably) the motives or background of its supporters or opponents" (Hamblin 1970:41). In Copi's words:
"*Whenever the person to whom an argument is directed (the respondent) finds fault with the arguer and concludes that the argument is defective, he or she commits the ad hominem fallacy*" (Copi 1992:127).
Roughly speaking, there are three main contemporary approaches to the study of argument ad hominem: logic, pragma-dialectic and rhetoric.

The logico-centric approach has until now dominated the whole field; its main issue is the logical validity and relevance of an argument bearing on the person of the opponent rather than on his argument *per se*. Argument ad hominem has thus been examined in the framework of the standard treatment of fallacies, where it acquired a pejorative meaning. Nuchelmans points out that already in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was undermined as a false logical move (1993:46). Commenting 20th century approaches, van Eemeren and Grootendorst quote Sellar's definition in 1917 of ad hominem as a fallacy: "*In this fallacy the argument is directed against the character of the man who is the opponent instead of adhering to its proper task of proving the point at issue*" (1993:53). It is often considered that "*the personal or moral character of a man has nothing whatever to do with the correctness or incorrectness of the arguments he advances*" (Rescher 1964:81 in van Eemeren 1993:56). Numerous studies, however, dealt with the question of the acceptability of arguments ad hominem, checking to what extent and under which conditions they might be relevant and logically valid.

Like many others, Woods and Walton developed the view that arguments ad hominem can be perfectly acceptable (Woods and Walton, 1977; Walton, 1985; 1987). In his book on emotions, D.Walton even claims that the "intensifying of personal involvement in a discussion" and the "heightening of emotions" brought about by arguments ad hominem have nothing reprehensible in themselves. The problem is that "the personal attack argument […] is typically associated with the quarrel as a type of dialogue" (1992:215). It thus threatens to bring about an illicit dialectical shift from one context of dialogue to another, deteriorated, one. This does not imply that the ad hominem should be eliminated – only that the emotional overtones of the personalization have to be kept within safe boundaries. In short, the ad hominem can be viewed as positive on the grounds of

a theory that not only distinguishes between different uses of the informal fallacy, but also gives *pathos* a legitimate role in argumentative discourse.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's pragma-dialectic approach keeps the notion of fallacy while abandoning altogether the standard logical treatment and suggesting other criteria of evaluation. Conceiving of argumentation as "a verbal and social activity of reason aimed at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint to the listener or reader" (1996:5), pragma-dialectic emphazises the interactional nature of argumentation.

"*Putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judge*", argumentation according to this view aims at the rational resolution of conflicts.
Therefore, it is subordinated to cooperation rules that ensure the possibility of the persuasion enterprise. In the pragma-dialectical perspective, an informal fallacy occurs when some rules of discussion (drawing on Grice's cooperation principles) are violated. Argumentum ad hominem in all its varieties is a fallacy insofar as it violates an essential rule of the discussion:
"*Parties must not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or casting doubts on standpoints*" (1992:108). The underlying assumption is that the expression of differences must be fully allowed in the confrontation stage preceding the resolution. Therefore, "a personal attack on one's opponent is another attempt to eliminate him as a serious partner in the discussion by eliminating his right to advance a standpoint" (1992:110). In all the variants of an argument ad hominem, the question is "*whether a party's comments are calculated to undermine the other party's position as a credible discussion partner*" (1992b:154).

In this approach based on speech-act theory and discourse analysis, the authors provide a normative framework where the argument ad hominem is evaluated on the basis of its role in a verbal exchange between rational participants. The issue is no more the contribution of ad hominem to logical reasoning, but its role in the interrelation developed in the discourse between the participants of the argumentative interaction. However, van Eemeren and Grootendorst still keep the notion of fallacy as well as a negative view of the ad hominem. I would like to examine to what extent the interactional framework they provide can bring about a more positive appreciation of ad hominem argumentative validity.
The basis for such a theory is to be found in Alan Brinton's studies on

argumentum ad hominem from a rhetorical point of view.
"*Taking a rhetorical, rather than a strictly logical, view of the ad hominem will involve going beyond thinking just in terms of the appeal to logos*". (1985:54).

Rather than emphasizing the emotional appeal of argument ad hominem, or pathos, Brinton connects it to *ethos*. The central role played by the person of the orator in ancient rhetoric makes it clear that his credentials can legitimately be checked or questioned. In this perspective the argument ad hominem is not a fallacy, but a perfectly valid argument, provided it is supported by factual claims showing that the speaker "*lacks moral authority on the question at hand, is not really committed to good deliberation or careful thinking in this case on account of ulterior motives, does not really share values or beliefs or principles which are presupposed in this context, or otherwise is deficient in ethos*" (Brinton 1985:56). Reasonable attacks on ethos are in Brinton's views good and fitting ad hominem. In contrast with logic relevance, however, ethotic relevance can be established only in relation to a particular case, as is shown by Brinton's analysis of a few modern and ancient examples.

Arguments ad hominem and ethos in an interactional perspective
This quick survey has yielded three important conclusions that can be used as points of departure for a description of the argument ad hominem constructive functions.
1. Argument ad hominem does not have to be analyzed in the field of logic, and of logos, as a fallacy (or, for the matter, as a non-fallacy).
2. The analysis of argument ad hominem has to be carried out in an interactional framework where the exchange between the participants and not the reasoning in itself is decisive.
3. Argument ad hominem can be analyzed in the rhetorical perspective as a valuable instrument of persuasion related not only to logos and pathos, but mainly to ethos (what Brinton calls the "*ethotic argument*",1986).

In the framework of these assumptions, I would like to outline an interactional model of analysis for the argument ad hominem based on contemporary views both of discursive ethos and of argumentative interaction (Amossy in press b).

If we define argumentative discourse as an interaction in the course of which an orator uses verbal strategies in order to make the audience adhere to his thesis, it follows that the relation built by the discourse between orator and audience is

crucial.
Perelman's new rhetoric emphasizes the fact that argumentation is a communicative process in which the orator has to take his audience into account by actually building an image of it. In this sense, the audience is always a fiction, even though in practice it is important that this fiction be not too far from reality. Just as the orator builds in his discourse an image of the audience he is addressing, he builds an image of himself. Or rather his speech is intended at strengthening or correcting the previous image he thinks his audience has of him when he sets out to address it. The final result of the persuasion attempt is partly dependent on the speaker's ability to create the right impression. Such is at least the assumption underlying the Aristotelian notion of ethos, which is acknowledged but rather underdeveloped in Perelman's new rhetoric. Seeing argumentation as an interaction aimed at persuasion calls for a strong emphasis on the interelation between two images built in the discourse, the speaker's and the audience's. Argument ad hominem plays a role in this interaction only when the polemical nature of argumentation is brought to the fore.

The dynamics of the process then involve three, and not two, participants: the proponent, the opponent, and the audience.

Christian Plantin rightly describes rhetorical and dialectical approaches as interactive, the first focussing on the relation between orator and audience, the second on the relation between proponent and opponent (Plantin, 1996). He points out that proponent and opponent do not have to be actual persons: they can be roughly defined as discourse and counter-discourse, attributed to a diffuse instance (the press, for example) or to an individual. In order to take into account both the opponent and the audience, Plantin suggests a tripartite model where argumentative interaction is defined as a situation of discursive confrontation in the course of which antagonistic answers to a question are built.

In the argumentative interaction, the opponent can be either the addressee, or the object of a refutation addressed at somebody else. Argument ad hominem can take place in both cases, provided the counter-discourse to be discredited is represented by an individual. When addressing his opponent, or when referring to his opponent in front of an audience, the speaker can attack his counter-discourse not only by refuting specific arguments, but by denouncing his credentials. He then tries to undermine an opinion or a position by undermining the ethos of the person who expresses it.

To fully understand how ethos contributes to the force of the argument, one has to redefine it in light of contemporary discourse analysis and of the social sciences. Let us start with sociological considerations on the speaker's status. To be legitimate, any discourse has to be issued by a speaker entitled to pronounce it. The force of argument derives from the institutional position of the person who expresses it. In *Ce que parler veut dire*, Bourdieu has developed the thesis that no performative utterance can have any effect if it does not come from an authorized speaker, namely a speaker authorized to say what he says in what he calls social rituals.
Argumentative success thus depends on the relation between the proprieties of discourse, of the person uttering it and of the institution authorizing him to utter it (Bourdieu 1982:109-111). As a result, ad hominem can rightly bear on the speaker's position and social legitimation: it can question his right and capacity to forward a given argument.

Although van Eemeren and Grootendorst would blame this criticism on the basis of a rule of general cooperation stating that every participant has a right to fully express his viewpoint, one has to admit that argumentation functions in institutional frameworks where roles and hierarchies are not equally distributed. It is impossible to deny the authority of a position in a given field, as well as it would not be wise to overlook the lack of authority of a speaker who does not have the right position in the social ritual he engages in.
However, such an exterior position is not, in spite of Bourdieu's polemical stand on the matter, the only element to be taken into account about the orator. There is another dimension of his ethos, corresponding to Aristotle's definitions as well as to contemporary pragmatic definitions like the one provided by Ducrot's theory of polyphony (1984): it is discursive ethos, namely, the image of the speaker built by the speech itself. The argument ad hominem is directed toward the verbal presentation of self of the opponent and is *ipso facto* dialogical, in Bakhtine's sense of the word. It confronts within its limits two discursive images, the one the opponent elaborated of his own self in previous texts, and the one the proponent is building of him in reaction to it.
The prior discursive ethos of the opponent and the polemical counterpart built by the argument ad hominem are both individual and social. On the one hand, it is particular, referring to the specific image of his person built by the speaker on a certain occasion. On the other hand, this idiosyncratic representation always relies upon a collective pre-existing representation, an underlying stereotype

(Amossy & Herschberg-Pierrot, 1996). My image as an intellectual depends on the stereotype of the intellectual in general, and of women intellectuals in particular, held in the collectivity my audience and myself are a part of. Thus the ad hominem may bear on these two dimensions: it can attack the individual, singular image or the collective model.

One tactic consists of claiming that the real person does not correspond to the individual image or the positive stereotype she is giving of herself (she is not the intelligent, learned person, or the true intellectual she pretends to be). Other tactics reject the legitimacy of the model (scorning women intellectuals) or call for another definition of the stereotype (like a woman intellectual is not someone who delivers papers at conferences, but someone who is active in political issues). In doing so, the speaker has to take into account the premisses of his audience to make sure that his attack on the adversary will hit the goal. On the other hand, denounciation of the opponent's ethos implies a construction of the proponent's ethos. If I attack an opponent who denies me the right to compete with him for a job by claiming that he is afflicted with a macho personality leading to the elimination of career women, I rely on the audience's acquaintance and acceptance of the male chauvinist stereotype. At the same time, I present myself as a convinced feminist and a person aware of her rights and ready to fight for them.
This analysis of the different elements building up ethos presents ad hominem as a criticism of the orator's right and capacity to influence his audience either by denouncing the opponent's usurped stand in a given context, or by attacking his verbal image and the stereotype underlying it.

A case study: Julien Benda's open letter to Romain Rolland
Let us take an example from the polemical exchange between French intellectuals and Romain Rolland during World War I. On February 19, 1916, Julien Benda joined the chorus against the pacifist positions expressed in Rolland's *Au-dessus de la mêlée* (*Above the battlefield*) in a polemical article published in the newspaper *L'Opinion***(i)**. Like his predecessors from both right and left wing, Benda widely used arguments ad hominem to denigrate the isolated defendor of peace. From the traditional vantage-point, we can find in his text all the sub-categories of the ad hominem. Benda uses the *tu quoque*: he accuses Rolland of acting like the thinkers he attacks for sticking to a position once they have chosen it in spite of facts and proves. He adds the *circumstantial ad hominem:* if the

author of *Jean-Christophe*, an advocate of French-German reconciliation, is so faithful to a flawed stance it is because he is interested in the triumph of a position that ensures his own prestige: “a man of letters does not easily let go what has made during twenty years his reputation and his fortune” (Benda 1917:273). Benda also takes advantage of the personal ad hominem, accusing Romain Rolland of being endowed with little intelligence and denouncing his rare incapacity of holding any idea without confusing it with others more or less close to it. Julien Benda thus participates in the violent campaign launched against Romain Rolland in France, which provides an endless reservoir of examples for advocates of ad hominem (Amossy, in press).

What I would like to outline here is the dynamics of imagebuilding underlying the arguments ad hominem in Benda’s text. Let us first point out that this text is an “open letter”, distributing the roles according to the scenography (Maingueneau, 1993) of the genre. A speaker in the first person (“I”) addresses his opponent while actually trying to convince not the addresse (“you”), but a third party, the readers of the newspaper to whom the letter is directed.

The contents of Romain Rolland’s *Au-dessus de la mêlée* (1915) are well-known. Rolland denounced the failure of the intelligentsia as well as of the socialists and the Church to defend the values of Western civilization and save Europe from destruction. He presents himself as an intellectual faithful to his mission and ready to defend the truth even against the general consensus. The reaction of French intellectuals united in the famous Union sacrée was unanimous: *violently attacking their opponent, they presented an image of the pacifist writer very different from the one he builds in his own discourse*.
To refute Rolland’s pacifist and humanist claims, Benda resorts without hesitation to ad hominem attacks. He tries to delegitimize the person of the author on different levels. First of all, he questions his authority to judge matters of European conflicts by referring to his stand in the field. Rolland was not writing in any official capacity, nor did he have any mandate to speak in the middle of an international crisis. His only justification was his duty as an intellectual called upon to denounce official propanganda and to interfere in public affairs when human values are at stake (Amossy, 1996).
Thus Benda sets out to demonstrate that his opponent does not have the authority of the intellectual, nor the experience and knowlege needed to fulfil this role; last but not least, he claims that his right to speak is an usurped one, shamelessly

bestowed by Rolland upon himself. In other words, the writer is not fit to hold the skeptron which he has taken without any authorization.
To make his point, Benda presents Romain Rolland not as an intellectual called upon to guide his fellowmen, but as a poet who has no ability to judge public affairs. *"And I know that virtues of the intellect have nothing to do with the bard; but we would like to see a bard present himself as a bard, and not as Truth coming to enlighten the world"* (Benda 1917: 276). In other words, the speaker has no authority to express himself in a genre in which he is not trained and has no skills. He should stick to his own stand in the literary field, which is that of a poet capable of lyricism but not of spiritual and intellectual guidance in human affairs.

The ad hominem thus aims at depriving the speaker of the right to influence people on political and public matters that are not in the realm of his specialty or responsability. Julien Benda contrasts the figure of the poet with the figure of the historian, who is at least a specialist in questions of relationships between nations.
Should I confess it? Your quiet seizure of the function of judge of the States astounds me, in spite of the Olympian poses to which men of letters have accustomed us during the last twenty years…[…] Strangely enough […] few persons ask themselves why [this function] suits you, how the role of estimating responsabilities in such a matter – at most acceptable concerning those who grew old in the study of conflicts between peoples, like Ranke or Lavisse – suits a man who has no other stock of knowledge than his sensibility (Benda 1917:277-78).

Most of all, Benda attacks Rolland's unquestioned pretension to confer upon himself a function he is not entitled to fulfil, having neither the institutional position nor the skills needed for it. To adopt Olympian poses is not enough to become superior. The condemnation does not spare other men of letters who consider themselves judges and arbiters in matters that have nothing to do with their own ability to interfere in public affairs. By denying Rolland recognition, Benda deprives his statements of their force and impact.
On another level, Julien Benda's open letter attacks not the writer's stand and external authority, but his image as an individual and an intellectual. The main purpose of this criticism on Rolland's ethos is to show that his presentation of self does not correspond to any reality. The letter thus sets out to demonstrate that the man is inferior in intelligence and unable of clear reasoning. There is a

discrepancy between what he pretends to be and what he actually is.
This personal attack is entirely built around the stereotype of the intellectual, which keeps its positive values but undergoes a redefinition concerning the features attached to this category. The emphasis is put on the importance of pure intellect, strength of mind, capacity to avoid confusion – all qualities that according to Benda Romain Rolland lacks, not only because he pleads for intelligence of the heart and shows an unjustified contempt for pure reason, but also because his discourse shows the weakness of his reasoning.
Thus the flaws of the man prevent him from embodying the figure of the thinker and the analyst that he claims to be. In order to support his assertions, Benda provides critical comments on Rolland's arguments: his text confuses justice with love, and is unable to give relevant answers or arguments. The attack on the speaker's ethos gives here an opportunity to refute his points by showing that they do not answer the real questions. The article is, nonetheless, focussing on the person of the speaker more than on the content of his text.

A last attack is directed against the personality of the writer as an individual. Romain Rolland in his *Above the battlefield* protested against the call to hatred that was part of the national consensus, and tried to oppose humanist values of brotherhood to violent feelings of antagonism. Julien Benda ironizes on the superiority conferred upon such a moral character: "*your horror of hatred would give lessons to God himself; we can guess that Charlemagne's feelings for Ganelon [the traitor] would incur only blame from you…*" Thus Romain Rolland is presented as a "rascal angel", a moral character turned into a questionable one by his excessive magnitude. Moreover, the pacifist's appeal for mutual love and reconciliation is interpreted as a lack of fortitude.
According to Benda, Rolland is still admired by all those who, seeing in the "*condamnation of struggle a condemnation of victory*", find in it a consolation for their fate of eternal loosers (Benda 1917:279). It is to be noticed that this portrait of Romain Rolland is in conformity with the stereotyped model of the pacifist as a defeatist lacking in moral strength and adopting positions on the verge of an absurd angelism. Incapable of real thought, deprived of reason, the opponent is also presented as a man with no moral strength.

Benda's letter, republished in a book entitled *Billets de Sirius* in 1917, is followed by an answer attributed to a fictional character, Critias, who stresses with humor the reflexive game of ethos building.

Critias blames the epistolary writer for attacking his opponent in his intelligence and not in his moral character. He should have claimed that the adversary has stolen from his brother, murdered his sister, or at least that he was able to do so. "*You show he is lacking in method, criticism, respect of facts, education of the mind… This does not raise any interest.*" (Benda 1917:281). It is thus the nature of the arguments ad hominem that is ill-founded.

The pseudo-Critias even claims that being without intellect does not undermine anybody nowadays, whereas by his insistence on intellect Benda builds a negative *ethos of himself*. "*It is eventually you that your letter presents as hateful*": Benda's cult of reason is an insult for the audience, his insistence upon denouncing weakness of the mind and denying to sensitive souls the right to judge complicated matters constitutes a threat for everybody. Critias prophesizes that his correspondent's love of reason will lead him to a miserable lonely death: "*You will die alone and hated by everybody as a poor dog in a corner*" (1917:282). Benda thus provides a humorous criticism of the ethos the polemist builds when using arguments ad hominem against his opponent. By accusing his adversary of being a pseudo-intellectual and a bad logician, the speaker presents himself as a man devoted to intellect and logic. His description of his opponent's person, the values embodied in his criticism and the rhetorical modes of enunciation he uses provide a self-portrait intended to reinforce the speaker's authority. But he can do so only if the speaker takes into account the premisses and the values of his audience. Critias's or rather Benda's ironic criticism bears on the speaker's failure to build a faithful image of the audience, and thus to elaborate a negative image of his opponent and a corresponding positive image of himself. This failure threatens to deprive his argumentation built on argument ad hominem of all its persuasive effect.

Benda's text – and meta-text – thus display the dynamics of argumentative interaction where the speaker builds a negative image of his opponent on the basis of his audience's premisses and values.

It shows how this image-building of the other also builds an image of the self, which in turn contributes to the force of argument.

NOTE

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