

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - William The Silent's Argumentative Discourse



1. William the Silent and the Dutch Revolt

This paper [i] is the second part of a two-part paper; the first part is entitled *Delivering the goods in critical discussion* (this volume). The general outlines of the framework we are developing for analyzing argumentative discourse are explained in the first paper. As a brief illustration of the application of our method, we shall here reconstruct some important features of an argumentative discourse produced by William the Silent, our 16th Century revolutionary.

As you may know, the years between 1555 and 1648 were a heroic period in Dutch history; they were decisive for the existence of the Netherlands as an independent state. These were the years of protest against the persecution of Lutheran, Calvinist and other Protestants, and resistance against the tyrannical Spanish Duke of Alva. Alva was governor of the Netherlands on behalf of King Philip II, who preferred to live permanently in Spain, which made that monarch more of a foreigner than his father, the Emperor Charles V, had been. The Revolt, as this period in Dutch history is generally called, led to the Abjuration of King Philip II and the founding of the Republic of the United Netherlands.

The political system Philip II inherited in the Netherlands can be described as a '*dominium politicum et regale*'. On the one hand, the sovereign governed according to laws and rules of his own design. On the other hand, he needed the people's consent to maintain these laws and rules (van Gelderen 1994). The political actions of Philip and his representatives were divisive in various respects; they led to an uproar that developed step by step into a real revolt. In this escalating development, various kinds of events and ideological considerations played a part. In the process, the Dutch Revolt became a fundamental source for the evolution of modern thinking about political power, the right of opposition, and national sovereignty.

The leader of the Dutch Revolt was William of Orange, better known as William the Silent - because of his gift of keeping his real purposes diplomatically hidden.

Since William was not only in a political and practical sense the inspiration and guardian of the Revolt, but also the intellectual leader, he is honoured to this day as the Father of the Fatherland, *Pater Patrias*. Born in 1533 as son of the ruler of the German principality of Nassau, he achieved his prosperity and a prominent position at the court of Charles V by unexpectedly inheriting from his cousin René of Châlons the title 'Prince of Orange', with all its accompanying wealth. William then became one of the mightiest men in the Netherlands.

After Philip II had succeeded his father in 1555, gradually the whole power structure of the Netherlands began to collapse. Owing to various factors, one of them being the severe repression of the Reformation by the King and his collaborators, an anti-Hispanic movement started to grow. The basic principles of sovereignty and their practical consequences became a matter of debate. As the revolution gained momentum, numerous texts - varying from public letters to extensive *apologias* - were published in an effort to legitimize the Revolt.

We are interested in examining the qualities of the argumentative discourse in which the motives for the Revolt are discussed - and usually defended. In particular, we would like to reconstruct the justification of William's actions offered by his famous Apologie. In reconstructing the historical meaning of the text, we follow Skinner (1978) and Pocock (1985: 1-34) in taking due notice of the political and, more particularly, intellectual and ideological context.

2. An integrated method of analysis

In *Delivering the goods in critical discussion* we explained that a pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative discourse amounts to a methodical reconstruction from the perspective of the projected ideal of resolving a difference of opinion by critical discussion. In the 'confrontation' stage of the discussion the difference is defined; in the 'opening' stage the starting point is established; in the 'argumentation' stage arguments and critical reactions are exchanged; in the 'concluding' stage the result of the discussion is determined. The pragma-dialectical analysis results in an analytic overview that contains all moves that are made in the discourse which are relevant in the various discussion stages; it can serve as a basis for a critical evaluation (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992).

The project we are currently engaged in aims at enriching the pragma-dialectical method of analysis with rhetorical insight into the strategic manoeuvring taking place in argumentative discourse. How exactly are the opportunities offered by

the dialectical situation in a discourse being exploited by the speaker or writer? Each stage in the resolution process has its own dialectical aim; it therefore depends on the stage the discourse has reached as to what kinds of advantage can be achieved rhetorically.

Strategic manoeuvring may, in our view, take place in choosing from the 'topical potential' available in a particular discussion stage, in adapting to 'auditorial demand', and in exploiting 'presentational devices'. The selection potential we view as a *topical system* associated with a particular stage in the resolution process. By selecting certain issues, defining and interpreting them, they are given 'presence' in the discourse, and by suppressing issues their importance and pertinence are denied. In adapting to auditorial demand, in each stage the moves that are made comply with the audience's good sense and preferences. The audience, which coincides with the antagonist in a critical discussion, may consist of various parts, so that certain moves can be effective in creating communion with one part, but not with another. In exploiting presentational devices, rhetorical figures are used to make the various moves most effectively present to the mind. In the one case, this may, be achieved by means of praeteritio: drawing attention to something by saying that you will refrain from dealing with it. In other cases, a rhetorical question may be a more effective manoeuvre.

3. William's Apologie as a specimen of argumentative discourse

Let us now return to William the Silent. Having led the revolt against Philip II, numerous attacks on William's life were planned - one of them, incidentally, by a sea-captain called Hans Hanssen. At first Philip formally kept himself apart from such actions, but in 1580 a royal Proclamation and Edict was published against the Prince of Orange, which officially outlawed him. Apart from grossly misrepresenting the course of the Revolt and William's role in it, this document attributes the worst imaginable vices to the Prince, accusing him of being 'the public plague of Christendom' and 'the enemy of mankind'. It promises a large sum of money and a peerage to the person who will kill the Prince. William the Silent's *Apologie*, written by his court chaplain Villiers in close co-operation with the Prince, was his response: it is a defence against various accusations, and a justification of his behaviour.

In the first place, the *Apologie* is a political pamphlet, albeit it a very lengthy one (more than one hundred pages). To a large extent, it has shaped future positive views on the Prince of Orange, as well as future negative views on his adversary, King Philip II. **[ii]** The *Apologie*, submitted to the States General in December

1580, was published in 1581 in French, together with a Dutch translation. In the same year, five French, two Dutch, and several Latin, German and English editions appeared. [iii] It is clear that the *Apologie* appealed to a great many readers – not just to those to whom it was immediately directed (Wedgwood 1989: 222).

It is characteristic of William the Silent's writings that they are calculated to take carefully account of the ideas of the people to whom they are addressed (Swart 1978, 1994). The attitude assumed by the author seems to a large extent to depend on his addressee (Smit 1960: 7-10, de Vrankrijker 1979: 123). It is therefore important to realise that the *Apologie* is addressed simultaneously to a number of different readerships. In this text, William of Orange is the protagonist, but the antagonists vary: the formally addressed States General – the collective of the Provincial States of the Netherlands; the rulers of European principalities to whom the *Apologie* was also sent; the formal protagonist of the counter standpoint, i.e., the avowed adversary Philip II; the successive governors and their counsellors – such as cardinal Granvelle – who shared Philip's standpoint; the malcontent Dutch Roman Catholic nobility that had turned against the Revolt; and individual traitors who implicitly defended contrary positions.

Being an apologia, William the Silent's essay represents a specific text genre: a special type of argumentative discourse, aimed at justifying oneself against accusations by others. Viewed from a pragma-dialectical perspective, the *Apologie* involves a delicate balancing of – real or professed – dialectical resolution-mindedness with strategic manoeuvring, with a view to achieving the rhetorical objective of having William's position accepted by all. William the Silent's *Apologie* can be analyzed as an attempt to achieve certain rhetorical aims without sacrificing any dialectical ambitions. To show how the available opportunities are used to this end in the *Apologie*, we shall give an analysis that integrates the rhetorical dimension into the dialectical dimension. We do not pretend to provide a fully-fledged integrated dialectical and rhetorical analysis of the text: we merely intend to illustrate our view of the various levels of strategic manoeuvring in the consecutive stages of argumentative discourse.

4. Analysis of William's strategic manoeuvring

The *Apologie* gives the impression of being an angry outcry in which various perspectives and views are unsystematically combined and scattered bits of

information are presented in arbitrary order. However, when viewed analytically, and particularly when seen against the background of King Philip's Proclamation, the *Apologie* proves to be an argumentative discourse in which the dialectical stages can be readily identified. We shall here concentrate on reconstructing the strategic manoeuvring in each of these stages.

Confrontation stage

Starting with the confrontation stage, which introduces the differences of opinion that occupy the author, it becomes clear that the Prince has selected an overwhelming number of issues, intending to cover virtually everything that relevantly can be said about the subject. These issues can be divided into several conglomerates. Most are a direct response to accusations made in the ban edict. They affect political, religious and personal aspects of the Prince's supposed rebellion. The political issues involve the juridical right of the Dutch - with the Prince as their leader - to stand up against their Sovereign, and the Prince's view of who is, in the end, entitled to take over government: the States General. The most important religious issues are Philip's suppression of Protestants and the right of freedom of conscience. Personal issues concern the Prince's descent, his marriages, his actions against Philip, and his motives for leading the Revolt.

A second, and surprisingly large, number of issues echo themes that earlier had been sounded by the Prince's compatriots. A telling example of this manifestation of internal dissent is the accusation that the Prince had stolen public money. But, as he himself emphasizes, everybody knew that he had spent his whole income and capital on the war against the Spaniards.

Last but not least, are the issues not really dealt with, but at best hinted at, although they are mentioned in the ban edict or known to have been discussed at the time. Of particular importance, in this respect, is the accusation in the ban edict that the Prince, at the time that he was still a Privy Councillor, had already started his dealings with the government's enemies. **[iv]** The Prince clearly evades this issue.

William's adaptation to his readership consists primarily in securing that the various components of his audience are being targetted by addressing the kinds of issue they are particularly interested in. The States General are met by the treatment of political issues, particularly those where agreement with the Prince can be expected. Religious issues are of additional interest to the German rulers, who preach moderation, as well as to the Calvinists, who want to defend the

Reformation, but probably also to the non-Calvinist Dutch nobility that wishes to protect Roman Catholics and other non-Calvinists. The Germans are approached by condemning the excesses of Calvinism, the Calvinists by an emphasis on their religious primacy, the non-Calvinist nobility by guarantees for the safety of the Roman-Catholics.

Among the presentational devices that the Prince uses most frequently in the confrontation stage are *praeteritio* and irony. *Praeteritio* is used to raise topics 'in passing', implying that they are not worth going into, while at the same time making the point. Important issues, such as the attitude of Philip and his governors towards William of Orange, are in this way effectively dealt with: 'I will not repeat the perjuries and deceits of the Duchess [of Parma], nor of the King on behalf of My Lords the Counts of Egmont and Horne [decapitated by Alva], nor the baits and allurements which they prepared for me' (*Apologie*, 94). Irony plays an important part in representing certain assertions made by the King in the ban edict, as for instance his denial that he ordered the Duke of Alva to levy the notorious tenth and twentieth penny taxes: 'But that, my Lords, which is greatly to be esteemed in this Proscription, so true and well grounded, is this, that the King did not command the Duke of Alva to impose the tenth and twentieth penny without the consent of the people' (*Apologie*, 89).

Opening stage

In the opening stage of the discussion, the Prince's repeated attempts to evade the burden of proof by shifting the issue is a dominant technique. The technique is used when dealing with the issue of disloyalty. The Prince claims: 'We have not had, on our part, any infidelity or treason, or understanding with the Spaniards; as our enemies on their part have had. Have they not, against their faith and promise, with an armed power, begun a war?' (*Apologie*, 110).

The accusation of violating the provisional peace treaty known as the Ghent Pacification is resisted by turning the issue upside down: 'Often times in this execrable Proscription, and in their little foolish defamatory libels and secret letters, they object unto me that I have violated and broken the Pacification. Let us see how [the Spaniards] on their behalf have maintained and kept it' (*Apologie*, 102). The Prince's attempts at creating a favourable starting point further involve establishing his *ethos* by an artful narration of the 'factual' background of his predicament and the course of events. In his narrative, his account stands out of a conversation he had long before the beginning of the Revolt with the French King Henry II. Henry is said to have revealed to the Prince Catholic plans for

exterminating the Dutch Protestants, which filled the Prince with a deeply-felt pity and presumably motivated him at this early stage to adopt the Protestants' cause.

Emphasizing common interests and shared goals, William adapts to the most important components of his audience by associating himself with the Dutch parties in the Revolt - the States General, the moderate nobility and the extreme Calvinists - and with the German Lutherans, while dissociating himself consistently from Philip II and the Spaniards by attributing despicable secret intentions to them. A striking example of the Prince's attempt to create a bond with the Dutch is his vehement reaction to Philip's contention that William is of foreign descent. Apart from dealing with this contention directly, the Prince also deals with it indirectly by spending a substantial part (about ten pages) of his *Apologie* on an elaboration on his ancestors' services to the Netherlands.**[v]** As regards his use of presentational resources, the most prominent devices William exploits in the opening stage are those that implicate the States General, repeatedly using the introduction 'As you know, My Lords' - meanwhile ridiculing his opponents.

Argumentation stage

In the argumentation stage, the Prince favours three categories of arguments: arguments about whether he can be blamed for certain actions, religious arguments, and political arguments. The main thrust of his 'I am not to blame'-arguments is that the Spaniards and the malcontents themselves did much worse things. As far as religion is concerned, William silently exploits his account of how he had taken pity on the Protestants in order to guarantee his protection of the Reformation. His political arguments refer to the protective relation between a sovereign and his subjects, to Philip's violation of the oath of allegiance between lord and vassal, and to the disastrous consequences that the current course of events would have - the suppression of the Reformation would be only a first step towards suppression of the whole population and tyrannical terror.

In the 'I am not to blame'-arguments, adaptation to the audience involves reinforcing the idea that he who does worse things loses his right to speak up. The religious argument rests on ethos; it consists, in fact, in a pathetic arousal of emotion in the audience.

The warrant brought to bear in the first political argument is the appealing idea that a sovereign can be expected to protect his subjects rather than oppress

them. The presentational device exploited in this argument is the use of folk wisdom: 'The people will more esteem him that maintains them, than him that would oppress them' (*Apologie*, 120-121). The second political argument is warranted by the principle that violating an oath eliminates an existing relation; the third by the rule that everything goes from bad to worse. In the oath argument, a counter-argument is turned into a pro-argument: 'If then I am not the King's natural subject - which he himself says -, I am by this unjust Proclamation and sentence absolved from my oath' (*Apologie*, 73). The argument that everything goes from bad to worse is in its presentation supported by a citation from the Bible, which was earlier used - but then meant as a threat - by the Duchess of Parma and Granvelle: 'The father has corrected you with rods, but the son will chastise you with scorpions' (*Apologie*, 66).

Concluding stage

In the concluding stage, the Prince's object is to have his views accepted. At a further remove, the rhetorical aim, which can be described as a 'consecutive perlocutionary effect', is to win the political and financial support of the States General. The selection made in the *Apologie* involves an appeal for their solidarity and an urgent request for money: 'My Lords, [...] keep your Union but do it [...] not in words nor by writing only, but in effect also, so that you may execute that which your sheaf of arrows, tied with one band only, doth mean' (*Apologie*, 125). 'Employ all the means that you have, without sparing, I say, not the bottom of your purses, but that which abounds therein' (*Apologie*, 145). The adaptation which is to encourage the States General's acceptance of this request consists in emphasizing the Prince's disinterest and loyalty, and his willingness to obey them under any circumstances. Rhetorical questions are prominent among the presentational means used to achieve the target conclusion: 'Would to God, my Lords, either my perpetual banishment, or else my very death itself, bring onto you a sound and true deliverance from so many mischiefs as the Spaniards [...] do devise against you [...], how sweet should this banishment be onto me, how delightful should this death be onto me, for wherefore is it that I have given over, yea lost all my goods? Is it to enrich myself? Wherefore have I lost my own brothers, whom I loved more than my own life? [...] Wherefore have I so long time left my son a prisoner, my son, I say, whom I ought so much to desire, if I be a father? Is it because you are able to give me another? Or because you are able to restore him to me again? Wherefore have I put my life so oftentimes in danger? What other recompense, what other reward, can I look for of my long travails, [...]

except to purchase and to procure your liberty, and, if need be, with the price of my blood?' (*Apologie*, 146).

5. Conclusion

On our definition, one can claim that a 'rhetorical strategy' is being followed in a certain stage of the discourse only if the strategic manoeuvrings in selecting from the available potential, adapting to the auditorial demand, and exploiting the presentational devices converge. In William the Silent's *Apologie* this is often the case. A major confrontation strategy is that of overburdening the difference of opinion by bringing up an exhaustive list of issues and at the same time concealing some important issues from the audience. The opening strategy is to create a broad zone of agreement by being at all parties' beck and call. The argumentation strategies are intended to overwhelm the opponents, and to foster unity among his compatriots by sketching a doomsday scenario. The main concluding strategy, as it relates to the States General, can be characterized as making them bite the bullet.

NOTES

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- ii.** The 'black legend' concerning the Spaniards finds its origin in William the Silent's *Apologie*.
- iii.** We shall refer to Wansink's (1969) edition of the English translation (1581).
- iv.** The Prince's letters to the Lutheran count Philip of Hessen - cited in Klink (1997: 120) - show that in this period the Prince was, in fact, guilty of high treason because he passed on state secrets to foreign rulers.
- v.** Pace Swart, who considers the Prince's elaboration on this point irrelevant (1994: 191).

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