

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Renaissance Roots Of Perelman's Rhetoric



Everyone here, I dare say, is aware of the stature of *The New Rhetoric* (as the *Traité de l'argumentation* came to be known in its English incarnation) has these days in the field of argumentation theory, of the elegance of Perelman's critique of cartesian formalism, of his re-positioning of the question of what constitutes reasonability, and of the consequent enhancement - perhaps the rehabilitation - of a discipline that many found suspect: rhetoric. You are all no doubt aware as well of the sorts of reservations Perelman's ideas have elicited, chiefly in the area of his notion of the "universal audience" or, indeed, of his radical audience-orientation in general. Of these I shall have nothing to say because my concern is a rather different one from those expressed in the vast majority of critical response to Perelman.

Nothing I have seen in the critical literature pays much attention to two important subjects treated by Perelman in the *Traité*: *loci* and figures. I do not know why this is so. It may be that his interpreters of record understand these things better than I do. But it is nevertheless exceedingly strange that they should ignore them, since they constitute by far the greatest part of Perelman's discussion. On the very face of it, therefore, a look at Perelman's treatment of *loci* and figures seems very much in order. His book, he tells us in the very first pages, was to be a study of the discursive methods of "securing adherence", methods that extend beyond the "perfectly unjustified and unwarranted limitation of the domain of action of our faculty of reasoning and proving" imposed by logic (p.3). His rhetoric is accordingly a method both of inquiry and of the means by which we can articulate the reasons for our decisions. The study of these discursive means centers on the *loci* of preference (NR pp.83-114/ TA 112-153) and *schèmes argumentatifs* (187-450/251-609) based on the *loci* (p.190/254f.), and on the verbal devices of eloquence in all its forms, devices ordinarily relegated to the realm of ornamentation and devalued as mere device (pp.167ff., 450f./ 225ff., 597f.). The primary subjects of the *Traité* are in short invention (not judgement, as so many

want to claim) and expression.

Since time is short (and the argument is long), I will restrict myself to a brief examination of the resemblances between Perelman's treatment of loci and Renaissance "place-logics" – particularly the place logic in the *De inventione dialectica* of the great Renaissance humanist, Rudolph Agricola.

Let me begin with a sketch of Perelman. A locus, Perelman tells us, is "a premiss of a general nature"; the sum of all loci constitutes a storehouse or *arsenal* "on which a person wishing to persuade another will have to draw, whether he likes it or not" (84/113). Perelman treats of two sets of loci: loci of the preferable (amplifying on those in Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.7) and loci which enable one to establish *liaisons* between facts. Loci of the preferable break up into two large "families": those centering on "quantity" (the whole is preferable to a part, the common to the rare, etc.) and those centering on "quality" (the unique is preferable to the normal, etc.). Loci for establishing *liaisons* between facts Perelman divides into associative loci and dissociative loci. Associative loci include what he calls quasi-logical "schemes" (tautology, transitivity, etc.) and another set centering on relations of succession (cause/effect, means/ end, etc.) and of coexistence (act and person, symbolic relations, all of which are derived from the "structure of the real"); and those loci which enable one to "establish the structure of the real" (example, analogy, etc.). Dissociative loci turn on stipulations as to the character of facts as real or apparent, as latent or manifest, as constructed or given, etc., which enable one to counter or transcend arguments based on associative loci. Association and dissociation are always mutually interactive.

Since Perelman calls these loci "premisses" and "argumentative schemes", one might be tempted to equate them, respectively, with "premisses" in syllogisms or enthymemes (or perhaps with Toulmin's "warrants") and with something like inferential schemata in logic. No doubt, a *locus* of preference which one might express as "the whole is preferable to the part" could be so construed, and it is easy to fabricate a syllogism using that locus as a major premiss or as a warrant. But that is not what Perelman is up to. To begin with, Perelman has little if any interest in syllogisms. At best, they might be seen as a sub-set of one of his "quasi-logical" loci, namely, transitivity. In reality, a syllogism (or enthymeme) is probably just one way, of many, of arranging an argument. Moreover, it is difficult to see how arguments from analogy, comparison, example, division, etc., could be

transformed into syllogisms without doing great violence to what Perelman has in mind. An idea of just what that was can, I think, be gathered from the comparison with Agricola I suggested before.

Agricola, who died young in 1485, is important in the history of rhetoric because he was the chief conspirator in a “semantic revolution” which re-inaugurated the classical Ciceronian view of invention as fundamentally rhetorical, breaking with the scholastic tradition beginning with Boethius which restricted commonplaces (as distinguished from particular places) to dialectic. Boethian dialectic, it will be remembered, was conceived as a universal verbal art whose application was restricted to specifically verbal acts – statements and arguments. Invention in Boethian dialectic discovered and provided the “maxims” (*maximae propositiones*) which could guarantee the validity of assertions made in disputation. This kind of dialectic ties invention to logical necessity, supplying the canons by which an argument may be judged as to its validity and, consequently, its truth. In the process, it removes dialectic from the realm of invention aimed at generating statements and arguments, especially ones based on imperfect knowledge of probabilities, when they are needed.

Agricola’s dialectic, like Cicero’s, is by contrast oriented toward invention rather than judgement. For Agricola, every disputed matter can be reduced to a question which asks whether a given predicate can be said to “inhere” in its subject. That is, Agricolan dialectic involves the analysis of subjects and predicates to discover – that is, “invent” – points of agreement (*consentanea*) or disagreement (*dissentanea*) between them. The nature of this analysis in invention can be seen by observing the application of loci – definition, genus, species, properties, adjuncts, etc. – to a proposition or question using the procedure Agricola called *ekphrasis* (*De inventione* 2.28, pp. 326ff. in the 1539 Cologne edition).

For example, we might consider the question “*An rhetorico petenda sint lustra in viam Achterburgwalensiem?*” – loosely, “Should teachers of rhetoric frequent certain establishments (the *lustra*) located along the Oude zijds Achterburgwal?” The definition of the subject, “teachers of rhetoric”, might be framed as “Good men skilled in teaching others to be good men skilled in speaking”; that of “those who frequent the *lustra*” as “Persons looking for a good time”. No *consentanea* here, it would seem. As for genus, it may be allowed that both are animals. The species of *rhetorici*: Aristotelian, Ciceronian, Perelmaniac, Toulmaniac, and the rest. No comparable species of the predicate term exist (as, for instance,

“sailing” is a profession – but perhaps there are different schools of sailing? I don’t know). As for property: of the *rhetoricus*, “lust for knowledge of the principles of rhetoric”; of the other, perhaps, the Latin name for which would be *lustrones*, just “lust”. Do we see *consentanea* here? The next locus in Agricola’s list is “parts” – arms, legs, head, and the rest in both the subject and predicate! So we seem to have some *consentanea* here. Under “conjugates”: for the one, “rhetoricizing”, I suppose; and for the other, “*lustrari*” – loosely, “hanging around houses of ill-repute”.

Now I realize that some people don’t see any difference here; but I will propose that these are *dissentanea*. Under “adjacents”: for *rhetorici*, concern for civic virtue, uprightness of morals, love of hard work, wrinkled brow, paleness, and the rest. As to the *lustrones*, uprightness and paleness, but clearly not for the same reasons. So I think we have some *dissentanea* here. Skipping a few loci brings us to final cause: for *rhetorici*, producing a future generation of good men skilled in speaking; for *lustrones* – well, perhaps we don’t have to go into that in detail, but *lustrones* usually don’t aim at producing future generations, do they? And so one goes on in this procedure, generating, on the one hand discourse about teachers of rhetoric and, on the other, about *lustrones*. Agricola’s system thus provides us with the sorts of things one can say about them. But – and this is crucial – unlike the case with Boethius, the Agricolan dialectician must have particular and concrete knowledge of both rhetoricians and *lustrones* in order to generate discourse about them.

Consider now how this kind of analysis discovers possible arguments bearing on the original question. Where we can see *consentanea*, we can develop liaisons on the basis of which we could argue that rhetoricians should hang around houses of ill-repute; or, on the contrary, that it wouldn’t be appropriate for them to do that, on the basis of the *dissentanea* we have discovered.

I’ll have to sum up this analysis without going through all twenty-four of Agricola’s loci, I am afraid. But first, I want to point out that some of our possible *consentanea* involve considerable equivocation, which, of course, is a trick used by sophists, not dialecticians; and that the only solid *consentaneum* is to be found under “parts”. And since the *dissentanea* seem to outweigh the *consentanea* – or so Agricola would conclude – there don’t seem to be any grounds for arguing that rhetoricians should hang out in houses of ill-repute aside from the fact that they, like *lustrones*, have arms, legs, heads, and the rest. I hope no one here is

disappointed by this.

Like the loci of Agricola's place logic, Perelman's loci enable us to generate probable arguments aimed at creating or intensifying adherence by appealing to the liaisons among accepted facts and preferences. If we had time, I think I could show how Agricola's list of loci embraces most, if not all, of Perelman's loci concerning "facts". Agricola's understanding of "definition" as a topical resource subsumes most of Perelman's "quasi-logical" loci, for instance. What Agricola calls "*comparata*" (Inv. 1.24, pp. 132ff.) cover Perelman's "analogy" (371ff./499ff.), "illustration" (350f./481f.), and "model" (362ff./488ff.); his "*opposita*" (Inv. 1.26, pp. 154ff.) are Perelman's "complements" (240ff./315ff.), and so forth.

I hasten to add that I am not claiming that Perelman consciously drew on Agricola for his notion of loci, for he does not seem to have known the *De inventione dialectica* well. In a way, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca re-invented the wheel, as Perelman himself was aware – that seems to be what he means when he remarks in the introduction that his book was "mostly related to the concerns of the Renaissance" (p.5/6). Nor am I saying that a comparison with Agricola could prove exhaustive. Perelman's loci of preference have no counterpart in Agricola, but draw rather on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Topics*. And what Perelman calls "dissociation" might well have been rejected by Agricola as a fallacy.

The comparison with Agricola is useful, nevertheless, since it sheds light on other aspects of Perelman's rhetoric. Even the example I generated earlier turns up something crucial in both Agricola and Perelman: it is grounded on common knowledge, common assumptions, common ethical standards, perhaps, all of which are "pre-understood" and all of which are presumed in appealing to a particular audience – and audience, if anything, is the paramount element in Perelman's views.

It may also be argued that, just as in Agricola, the syllogism occupies a subsidiary position – if it holds any position at all – in Perelman, for whom the discoverable liaisons among facts are more subtle, much more flexible, and much more in the realm of accepted particular facts than the liaisons recognized as legitimate by logicians. I do not think this can be stressed enough. From what I have seen, most readers of *The New Rhetoric* have exhibited an almost uncontrollable temptation to assimilate Perelman's inventional method to some version of syllogistic procedure, ignoring the cautions he expressed in the last piece he published in the U.S. (QJS 70 [1984], pp. 188ff.) about the tendency to "Toulminize" his

rhetoric by turning it into an “informal logic”. In a way, it must be admitted that we are all afflicted by what Kenneth Burke called a “trained incapacity” in view of our inabilities to avoid reducing the notion of “argument” to the syllogistic model, indeed, to a peculiar version of that model long ago discredited.

This observation brings me to a final point of resemblance between Agricola and Perelman. Both, I think it can be said, found themselves at the center of a “semantic revolution”, the more recent of which is just beginning to gain momentum. A “semantic revolution” occurs when terms remain the same but their meanings change. A good example would be the term “dialectic”, which had undergone many; or “argument”, for that matter. The sense of “revolution” here is not, I should add, the sense in which revolutions tear down the old and replace it with something completely new; but an older sense of “revolution” – one evident in the reference to “The Glorious Revolution” of 1688 in England, wherein affairs “re-volved” back to an earlier state. In a sense, it is possible to say that, just as Agricola’s “revolution” carried him back beyond Boethius to Cicero, so Perelman’s has carried him back beyond Tarski and Frege, beyond Spinoza and Descartes and what Perelman calls a bourgeois preoccupation with evidence, to Agricola or to thinkers like Agricola, who “revolutionized” rhetoric during the Renaissance. It may be, I have come to think, that just as Agricola saw a need to reach back beyond Boethius, we will have to reach back beyond Descartes to Agricola if we wish to understand Perelman rightly.