

# The Ethos of Academic Discourse

PATRICIA L. BIZZELL

I RECALL reading a survey of viewers of the televised Ford-Carter debates, which presented the perhaps unsurprising findings that those who had favored Carter before the debates felt that he won, while those who had favored Ford were convinced that their man came out ahead. In other words, few people's minds were changed by what purported to be a reasonable, persuasive exposition of the candidates' views. More recently, a televised "debate" between candidates for governor of New Jersey gave the viewers even less chance to be persuaded; the number of candidates (a dozen or so) attempting to present their views in a very short time (one hour) precluded any exposition at all. Most of the candidates didn't attempt it but instead chose to rely on a variety of rhetorical gestures. For example, one candidate decided he could best convey his views by sitting in frowning silence, with folded arms, throughout the "debate," while another chose to initiate a shouting match with the moderator early in the program and then to storm out of the studio, shaking his fist.

Feeble as the reasoning in political debates may seem to the teacher of rhetoric, such debates provide just about the only examples on television of any attempt at extended rational presentation of ideas. "Ideas" appear more often on television in the talk-show format. A celebrity's views on abortion or censorship are solicited, not to begin a consideration of the reasonable or defensible positions that may be taken on such debatable issues but to establish what classical rhetoric terms the speaker's "ethos." The audience's interest in a talk-show

guest is determined, it seems to me, mainly by a series of aphorisms that contribute, along with his or her physical appearance, dress, and gestures, to make up the guest's "media image." This concept is probably much more familiar to television viewers than the classical notion of ethos, which it replaces in the rhetorical situation of the talk show. An analysis of parodic talk shows, such as "Fernwood 2-Night," would probably yield a clearer idea of the function of this "media image." And its operation can also be seen in the introductory questioning of the contestants on game shows, another popular item of television fare.

I would like to suggest that the dearth of extended rational presentation of ideas on television and the medium's dependence instead on the ethos of the speaker may help to create freshman students of composition who have trouble with "the skills of elucidation and validation and sequencing in expository writing," as Mina Shaughnessy defined the problem recently in this journal.<sup>1</sup> For my proposition to have merit, I do have to assume that our students are socialized in language use much more through watching television than through reading and writing in academic discourse, but the findings of a panel appointed by the College Board to study declining verbal S.A.T. scores give some support to this assumption.<sup>2</sup> I would

<sup>1</sup>Mina Shaughnessy, "Some Needed Research on Writing," *CCC*, 28 (December, 1977), 318. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Willard Wirtz, chairman, *et al.*, *On Further Examination: Report of the Advisory Panel on*

like to examine in what way television may be detrimental to the acquisition of the skills Shaughnessy mentions, by examining some functions of a speaker's ethos.

Edward P. J. Corbett cogently summarizes Aristotle's concept of ethos or ethical proof:

Sometimes an author or a speaker comes to us with an antecedent reputation that disposes us to react to him either favorably or unfavorably. But while recognizing this fact, Aristotle insisted in his *Rhetoric* that the ethical appeal depends ultimately and crucially on what is said and how it is said in the discourse itself. Aristotle maintains that a speaker or writer will establish his credibility with us—that is, his persuasiveness—if he projects an image of himself as being a man of good sense, good moral character, and goodwill.<sup>3</sup>

Corbett emphasizes the importance of the ethical appeal even more strongly when he draws on its analysis by another classical master of rhetoric, Quintilian:

The ethical appeal is especially important in rhetorical discourse, because here we deal with matters about which absolute certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. Quintilian felt that of the three kinds of rhetorical discourse, deliberative oratory had the most need for the ethical appeal (he called it *auctoritas*). (Corbett, p. 93)

Although Corbett himself doesn't make this connection, I would like to suggest that his discussion of enthymemes, in a chapter subsection entitled "The Appeal to Reason," sheds some light on how a speaker goes about convincing his audience of his "good sense, good moral

character, and goodwill." Corbett explains:

Aristotle was shrewd enough to see that we base persuasive arguments not only on what usually or generally happens but also on what people believe to be true. . . . Every civilization has a body of accepted opinions that influence the conduct of its affairs—a body of "truths" which have never really been demonstrated but in which the people have faith, almost to the point of accepting them as self-evident. (Corbett, p. 74)

Corbett argues that the speaker should familiarize himself with these "truths" and use them as the basis for the enthymemes or truncated syllogisms with which the speaker hopes to persuade an audience. Surely one uttering "self-evident opinions" will impress his or her audience as a judicious reasoner. Indeed, if the speaker is also a member of the "civilization" that holds these beliefs, he or she probably believes them with at least some of the sincerity that the audience does and can thus impress the audience as a "good" person.

Frank D'Angelo, in a recent article on proverbs in this journal, seems to be arguing that proverbs also fall into this category of accepted opinions. After watching a televised interview with a Boston protestor against busing, he concludes "that proverbs are not just outworn sentiments from an earlier age but that they are still being used by people every day to win arguments. Because proverbs are so familiar, they often win uncritical acceptance from the audience."<sup>4</sup> He concludes his argument by stating that proverbs "still have a vital relevance for modern man in the presentation and preservation of ethical values" (D'Angelo, p. 36). D'Angelo, however, apparently does not see the meaning of "ethical" to which I am pointing, as he devotes his article to an

*the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1977), pp. 35-37.

<sup>3</sup>Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 19. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Frank D'Angelo, "Some Uses of Proverbs," CCC, 28 (December, 1977), 365. All further references to this work appear in the text.

extremely interesting discussion of proverbs as heuristics for invention, without considering their underlying function in developing the ethos, or moral appeal, of the one who uses them. But I have a more serious quarrel with D'Angelo's approach: he remains squarely within the "civilization" for which the proverbs express "accepted opinions," to use Corbett's terms. He seems to regard the problem of finding arguments as a problem in uncovering logical appeals that are therefore universal almost by definition; and Corbett's discussion of enthymemes seems prone to a similar misemphasis.

For our students, the problem of capitalizing on the pre-eminent power of the ethical appeal is more of a problem in figuring out the conventions of academic discourse, as Mina Shaughnessy clearly recognizes. In discussing the more complex writing problems of her students, she finds that

Now, beginning adult writers . . . do not know the rituals and ways of winning arguments in academia. Indeed, so open and vulnerable do they appear in their writing that teachers often turn sentimental in their response to it, urging them into the lion's den of academic disputation with no more than an honest face for protection. (Shaughnessy, p. 319)

Shaughnessy senses that the ethos of the "honest face" is not adequate for academic discourse, as she complains that "the emphasis in writing instruction over the past years has not encouraged a close look at academic discourse nor favored such images as the contest or the dispute as acceptable metaphors for writing (Shaughnessy, pp. 319-320).

Students' reliance on the "honest face" ethos leads them into many of the rhetorical postures that writing teachers complainingly identify as weaknesses in argumentation. I'm thinking of such familiar practices as the bald assertion of an opinion about some controversial is-

sue, without supporting arguments or extensive evidence, as if the assertion itself constituted "proof"; and the defensive tactic, when the instructor attacks such assertions by asking the students how they would meet various opposing arguments, of exclaiming indignantly that "everyone is entitled to their [sic] own opinion." I contend that students rely on this expression of the "honest face" ethos not only because their teachers have waxed "sentimental" over it but also because the students are unfamiliar with the "rituals" of academic discourse. I contend that they most often see "ideas" presented in the mass media in just this aphoristic, "self-evident" way: a way that assumes that rational debate cannot resolve controversial problems, so that all that remains of importance is to identify what side one is on, to solidify the personal image or ethos one has found to be most acceptable to the peer audience with which one is most concerned.

My point, however, is not to launch fruitless accusations that students are guilty of murdering the tradition of rational argument due to subliminal intoxication with television talk shows. I do suggest that we turn our energies away from the project of attempting to delineate usable heuristics for inventing arguments of universal appeal. This project, it seems to me, dead-ends right now in psychology and related fields, which cannot yet provide us with a paradigm of basic human cognitive modes. While we wait for, or contribute to, research in this area, I think we can work on ways of making the ethos of academic discourse more accessible to our students. To do so will probably require students to think about what kind of person the intellectual work of college seems to be asking them to be. Perhaps we can help them begin their deliberations by a sort of revamping of our theories of teaching writing through consideration of the audience, already explored so brilliantly

by James Kinneavy and James Moffett. I'm thinking of the kind of analysis that already goes on in some technical writing courses, where students may be asked to analyze the format of a professional journal in their major field and then tailor an essay for publication in it. Once again, I think Mina Shaughnessy has pointed our way in her insightful characterization of academic discourse, in which

the writer, often with great cunning, strives to present his or her intent in a way that will be seductive to an academic audience, which, while it aspires among other things to high standards of verification and sound reason, is nonetheless subject to other kinds of persuasion as well—to the deft manipulation of audience expectations and biases, to shrewd assessments of what constitutes “adequate proof” or enough examples in specific situations, to the stances of fairness, objectivity, and formal courtesy that smooth the surface of academic disputation. (Shaughnessy, p. 319)

Lest we feel that a full pursuit of Shaughnessy's analysis would lead us into an unmanageable exercise of cultural anthropology, performed upon ourselves, she has indicated a particular area in which we can begin our researches—what she calls “vocabulary”:

. . . we have done even less to describe the common stock of words teachers assume students know—proper names, words that have transcended their disciplines, words that initiate academic activities (*document*, *define*, etc.), words that articulate logical relationships, etc. (Shaughnessy, p. 320)

I suggest that this “common stock of words” constitutes for academic discourse the “accepted opinions” upon which, Corbett explains, enthymemes are based; and I have tried to argue that it is through the judicious manipulation of such a “common stock” of opin-

ions, or ways of thinking about things, that a speaker convinces his or her audience that he or she is a worthy, intelligent person. I don't think that we risk creating bullshit artists by making the ethos of academic discourse available to beginning adult writers. Rather, I think we may begin to save ourselves, and our students, from the frustration of feeling that their learning to write is blocked by kinds of ignorance not usually attacked directly in writing classes. For example, I was convinced that one failing student was really very bright, even though her malapropisms made the other teachers in my office laugh. And I know that after struggling to compose an essay on the relation of the Declaration of Independence to the fight for Black civil rights, one student was enraged to find his failing grade attributed to his assumption that Abraham Lincoln influenced the Declaration's framers. By calling for a “taxonomy” of academic discourse, Shaughnessy has suggested how we might begin to make the academic ethos available to these students.

What might be the elements in this taxonomy? It seems to me they might cover a wide range. One element, indicated by Shaughnessy's “proper names” and “words that have transcended their disciplines,” might be something like a compendium of knowledge that anyone should possess who has grown up in this culture. I'm thinking, for example, of a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible, of the chronology of Western history, of modern developments in physics and economics, and even of the “current events” of popular culture in the last ten years. I realize that any attempt to outline such a compendium lies open to charges of cultural bias—but in a way, that's just the point. Whatever his or her background, the student who is attempting to master academic discourse is attempting to pass for a member of a particular cultural group who shares this “common stock” of knowledge. I know

that failure to share it is one of the most salient ways a student destroys his or her ethos in the world of college intellectual life.

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy has noted what may be another element in the taxonomy of academic discourse, when she characterizes the advanced student-writer as making his or her "greatest gain" "in the use of relational words. . . . Not only do we find most of the idioms of connection, both logical and rhetorical, that produce the web of discourse in analytical writing but we find the syntactical structures that underlie many of these idioms."<sup>5</sup> This increased mastery of logical connections leads to a related gain, the reduction of pronoun-reference errors. Perhaps the very forms of sentences using relational words can be used as an heuristic to initiate students into the kind of reasoning acceptable in academic discourse.

Here Shaughnessy also notes advanced writers' use of "nouns that name attitudes, ideas, tendencies" (*Errors*, p. 207), Latinate words (often imprecisely used) (p. 208), and "predictable phrases" (p. 209) of the sort that George Orwell deplors in that perennial freshman reading assignment, "Politics and the English Language." The point here may be that Orwell's advice is not appropriate for most freshman today, who have not yet mastered academic discourse. As Cleo McNelly has argued, "Of course, the major problem is that Orwell presumes his readers have al-

ready been taught to write—badly."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps they should be encouraged to experiment with making their prose sound formal, if such experimentation is coupled with instruction in the necessary forms of academic argument. Probably all of us composition teachers have early productions of our own whose pomposity now embarrasses us but which we see as stages in our progress to a more manageable yet respectable style.

My suggestions here are tentative. I suspect that before we can arrive at a taxonomy of academic discourse, we will have to consult our colleagues in other college departments. Does the ethos of historians, music theorists, chemists, present any common features? Further, I do not want to suggest that we can arrive at a taxonomy only by cataloguing the stylistic features of our professional prose. It is for this reason that I have emphasized the function of ethos. As Shaughnessy has suggested, academic discourse seems to require not only certain apparently analyzable features of vocabulary and syntax but also such ethical qualities as "formal courtesy" and "shrewd assessments of what constitutes 'adequate proof.'" We must be willing to be self-conscious about the value we place on the ethos of academic discourse. We must also be willing to confront the social ramifications of this ethos, if we are to persuade our students that it is in their best interests to pursue their intellectual work beyond the television image.

*College of the Holy Cross  
Worcester, MA*

<sup>5</sup>Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 206. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup>Cleo McNelly, "On Not Teaching Orwell," *College English*, 38 (February, 1977), 555.