

CHAPTER 4

RHETORIC AND TRUTH: THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCENE

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ABSTRACT. The author uses two biblical descriptions of the destruction of the Temple (587 BCE) to elucidate the contrast between factual and poetic descriptions of disaster. Turning then to the testimonies heard at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission he claims that these are, in fact, acts of identification: between the feelings, attitude, suffering of the victims and the audience, the commission members, the media. Obviously this sort of identification cannot be false, it must manifest the truth. But truth, facts, reality, are not communicative, and hence not as persuasive as self-evidence. The testimonies heard at the Truth and Reconciliation sessions produce a rhetorical discourse that invites a rhetorical analysis mainly for the sake of studying the process of establishing the “story” of the nation’s collective memory through the various testimonies.

For over a hundred generations, since 587 BCE, on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Ab, which is the traditional date for the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians, Jews all over the world gather together and read the Biblical reflection on that national catastrophe.

Interestingly enough, this historical disaster is presented through two different literary media in the Hebrew Bible: a prosaic, historiographical account (2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 52), on the one hand, and a poetical account, the Scroll of Lamentations, on the other. Lamentations is a poetic proclamation of five poems referring to the destruction of the Temple.

The poetic account of Lamentations, rather than the historical “factual” presentation, is the text read at the synagogues on the traditional memorial day of the fall of Jerusalem. The question is why? The historical account narrates the events in minute detail, intending to present an accurate and coherent description of the fall; why was it not chosen as the narrative that perpetuates the event in the course of the national reading on the memorial day?

For the sake of demonstration I shall read a few sentences from the prosaic narrative, and then I shall read verses from Lamentations, seeking to draw conclusions regarding the poetics of prose versus poetry, and the impact on the audience.

Zedekiah rebelled against the King of Babylon. And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, King Nebuchanezzar of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it (...) on the ninth day of the fourth month, the famine became so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land ... (2 Kings 25: 1-26)

Now let me read the following verses from Lamentations:

Even the jackals offer the breast and nurse their young (...) the tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst / the children beg for food but no one gives them anything. Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets (...) now their visage is blacker than soot. They are not recognized in the streets; their skin has shrivelled on their bones: It has become as dry as wood. Happier were those pierced by the sword than those pierced by hunger (...) The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children. (Lamentations 4: 2-10)

The singularity of the famine of the historical narrative has been transformed through the poetry of Lamentations into a universal feeling, shared by every human reader/listener who is shocked by the most awful expression of the starvation: a mother cooks and eats her baby. That is to say, the medium of poetry reaches for a different goal than the medium of the historical account. The historical medium seeks to narrate *what* happened while poetry re-tells *how* we feel regarding the event. The “what” is just a means of giving the information in a coherent way. The “how” is the happening itself.

The point is that in order to communicate, we need to seek a response. Thus, it is not enough to know *what* we ought to say, claims Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (1403b), we must also say it as we *ought*. Aristotle explains as follows:

We ought in fairness to fight our case with no help beyond the bare facts: nothing, therefore, should matter except the proof of those facts. Still (...), other things affect the result considerably ... the way in which a thing is said does affect its intelligibility (1404a).¹

However, Aristotle stresses: “Nobody uses fine language when teaching geometry” (1404a). Indeed, Aristotle points to the crux of the matter: there is a distinction between two sorts of discourse: “geometry”, and the other. This distinction has been elaborated further by Perelman (1982), in terms of the juxtaposition of scientific and non-scientific discourse. This is the distinction between dialectical argumentation and analytical argumentation. The analytical format is the scientific one, it is provable, while the non-scientific format utilizes quasi-logical arguments, which are not precise scientifically and actually are not provable. Speeches which seek to affect their listeners through stirring emotions utilize the dialectical approach since, at the end of the day, the goal is not so much to present the bare facts, e.g., the reference

¹ Clearly, W. Rhys Roberts’s English translation of *Rhetorica* was used and quoted literally here, as in: Aristotle, 2001 (1941), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* ed. R.M. McKeon (New York: Modern Library, first edition Random House, 1941, pp. 1317-1451). This translation is highly respected, and for good reasons, but differs considerably from the more literal one presented in: Aristotle, 1991, *Aristotle on rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse*, Kennedy, G.A., ed., New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Eds.)

to the famine in Kings, but rather to evoke emotions that stimulate the readers to respond; a case in point is the vivid description of the famine in Lamentations.

This explains why the deliberative genre, that is, political speeches, differ in their literary/stylistic design from legalistic speech. Legalistic speech seeks to reveal the bare facts, while deliberative speech intends to affect, to raise sympathy, to communicate not only via the facts, each one in itself, but through the discourse as a whole, as a moving discourse.

Now, let us turn our attention to the South African scene, mainly to the testimonies presented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. I want to share with you a quote taken from the hearing CT/00222, which took place at the University of the Western Cape on 5 August 1996. This is the testimony of a Maureen Cupido, a mother whose son, Clive, was shot and killed by the police in 1985. We read the mother saying:

Well, I was sitting, and me and my husband was sitting waiting for Clive to come home (...). Clive came home early (...) and then he told me this march is going to have a lot of trouble. Little knowing that he is going to be killed (...) and we, we wait for Clive to come home (...). I heard the shots (...). And then I asked God if it is my child, take him away, I don't want him to be paralyzed. And just after the shots, this chaps, this children running to our house and all they said, Mrs Cupido is Clive here I haven't got such brilliant children, but his whole aim was that he, he wanted to go and work, he was frustrated, he wanted to make his ten finished and then he told me, mommy you cannot afford to send me to varsity, but I'll go and work and I'll do part-time, I'll do part-time varsity, so I am going to work to help you, you see. That was his aim, he just wanted to finish up his standard ten. And I mean – I feel that the truth must come out, people should know that it wasn't my son that kept the policeman (...) so the truth must come out, it must come out (...).

This is not the legalistic text format of merely presenting the bare facts and letting the judges judge. We see through the hearing the worried mother speaking under the frightful circumstances, expressing her feelings. She does not limit her testimony – and is not asked by the committee – to the legalistic facts of the case. Rather she elaborates about her son's wishes to study half time in order to work and help her.

Nevertheless, the mother insists: "The truth must come out". For the sake of this truth the witness is pouring out her feelings, her fears and her son's wishes. She points out how poor they were. And the committee accepts the presentation of the mother's feelings, fears and compassion, recording it as an official document. The committee's concern is, therefore, not only what happened, but to shed light on the conditions of the family as well as the mother's fears in her own personal language. The trauma is revealed. That is to say, the word "truth" in this respect is much more than the "bare facts" of the shooting itself. It revolves around the tragedy of the family, of the son

killed, and the mother's thoughts and fears. In this regard the following remark of Antjie Krog (1998: 15-16) is illuminating:

One morning, when I was still a lecturer at a training college for black teachers, a young comrade arrived. He refused to enter my class. He called Afrikaans a colonial language. "What is English then?" I asked. "English was born in the centre of Africa", he said with great conviction, "it was brought here by Umkhonto we Sizwe"². That was his truth. And I, as his teacher, had to deal with this truth that was shaping his life, his viewpoints, his actions.

"His" truth versus the historical "facts".

Will the commission be sensitive also to the "truth" of, say, the young student? Indeed, if its interest in truth is linked not only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but *justice*. If the commission regards truth as the widest possible compilation of peoples perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is "justice" in its deepest sense.

"Truth", explains the *Webster Dictionary*, is "the quality of being in accordance with facts or reality; a fact, a reality that which conforms to fact or reality". On the other hand, justice is not just truth. Justice is associated, according to Webster with "retribution, merited reward or punishment".

Indeed, Maureen Cupido seeks the "truth": "I feel that the truth must come out (...) so the truth must come out, it must come out", she repeatedly emphasized (TRC etc.: 50). But actually she appeals to justice. The truth is too narrow for her. The way to seek the truth is through the reconstruction of the bare facts. While rhetoric is the means for seeking justice rather than truth. Rhetoric intends to shape, to stir emotions, to establish the collective memory. The "story" is the "myth that binds different people in a common belief, in a shared past and thus is a factor in the shaping of personal identities within the process of nation building." (Peri 1999: 108). Mrs Cupido tells her story.

In conclusion, the Scroll of Lamentations, and Mrs Cupido's testimony share a common aim. That is, to capture the audience's feelings through "identification", which is, according to Kenneth Burke, the fundamental role of persuasion. Burke writes as follows:

As for the relation between "identification" and "persuasion", we might well keep in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification and communication (Burke, 1969: 46).

² The military wing of South Africa's liberation movement. (Eds.)

Burke continues: “You persuade a man only in so far as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Burke 1969: 55).

The point is that the testimonies heard at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are, in fact, acts of identification. The testimonies are not heard as a court case that seeks to determine the truth. Rather, the testimonies seek identification. That is, identification between the feelings, attitude, suffering of the victims and the audience, the commission members, the media. Obviously this sort of identification cannot be false, it must manifest the truth. But truth, facts, reality, are not communicative, and hence not as persuasive as self-evidence. The bottom line of Burke’s “identification” as the premise for effective communication, and hence persuasion, is the realization that the facts themselves do not communicate. And persuasion is a product of communication. This is why Perelman made the distinction between analytical reasoning and dialectical (Perelman 1982). Rhetoric is dialectical, which depends on the notion of identification between the addresser and the addressees. The testimonies heard at the Truth and Reconciliation sessions produce a rhetorical discourse that invites a rhetorical analysis mainly for the sake of studying the process of establishing the “story” of the nation’s collective memory through the various testimonies.

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