SWORDS OR PLOUGHSHARES? A RHETORICAL CHOICE

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"The real use of all knowledge is this: that we should dedicate that reason which was given us by God for the use and advantage of man." — Bacon

I went to a conference recently at the University of Chicago at which a number of papers were being presented. The participants — presenters and respondents — sat in a triangle at the front of the room and we the audience, about two hundred of us, sat in chairs arranged in tiers in a squared-off U shape around the triangle. Each speaker would give his or her paper from a podium at one corner of the triangle and sit back down for the discussion which followed, which would first of all involve only those in the triangle, then would be opened up to the rest of us.

The first speaker gets up to give his paper, which is to be on history. He is very assured, a good-looking man who seems comfortably aware of his good looks, probably in his middle forties. He is clever and uses words well; possibly he is a little facile, but it is too early to tell. He speaks flamboyantly, with much gesticulating; he is an entertaining speaker. He makes many generalizations. They sound impressive. He is impressive. Actually, it dawns on me after a while that I'm more aware of his being impressive than I am aware of what he is saying. He finishes his paper and sits down and the questioning begins. I am eager to hear it because I am not sure what he has said, although I found some of it provocative. He sidesteps the questions of the people in the triangle; he does not seem to be thinking much as he reacts to the questions rather than answering them. He looks often at us, and I have the feeling that he is playing to us. Once in a while he becomes heated,

when he is pressed to explain himself. But he never does explain himself very adequately, and after a while the discussion is thrown open to us.

At one point in his paper, he had said that history was about us; in almost the next sentence he had seemed to be saying that history had nothing to do with us at all. I want him to clarify what he had said. He is unwilling to do so. He sidesteps my question, just as he has done with the others. He says that history is inquiry, but he is reticent about just precisely what it is an inquiry into. I push him and he says some more, using an impressively large vocabulary — but still he does not answer my question. By this time I am exasperated, and I ask one last time. "If history's about us and we have nothing to do with history, then what is history?" "Now that's an interesting question," he says; and with a final gesture of turning his head away he dismisses me and signals for the next question.

Throughout all of the question time it was evident that this speaker was enjoying himself. I did not like his enjoyment. It seemed that he had more at stake in performing than he had in the content with which he was dealing — that he was there to tell, but not to explore and certainly not to learn anything new. He parried the questions rather than thinking about them; they served as foils for his performance. This was a fencing match, and he was very nimble on his feet. It was about fencing. It was not about inquiry at all.

The image of rhetoric as being a tool for winning a battle with words is sadly commonplace — and not only in the giving of papers at universities. "He was only talking rhetoric" we say, meaning that we did not believe what someone said, that he was either manipulating us for his own ends or that he was mouthing platitudes in which he himself did not believe.

And we too, though we might not think of ourselves as rhetoricians, are caught up frequently in this image of words as vehicles for winning and losing. How often do we find ourselves in conversation about something about which we care deeply, and at the first sign of disagreement our stomachs tighten and we leap to defend our positions or to attack the other person's before we even know clearly what his or her position is? Or if we do not choose to attack or defend, we choose to walk away in order to avoid the disagreement. Why are we so quick to assume battle? And what constitutes winning? Surely it can't be persuasion, because nobody was ever persuaded of anything within a context of combat.

The people in the triangle, however, clearly were inter-

ested in inquiry. They genuinely wanted the speaker to answer their questions. Long after it was clear that he wasn't going to take any questions seriously, they kept on pushing him to answer anyway; and although they became impatient and for sure got in a jab or two or three, they were not combative, merely annoyed.

The speaker got to me with his swaggering refusal to think. But in a more important way the questions without the booby traps really got to me. For these questions and the manner of their asking made me aware of how much I wished to believe in and to be a participant in this discourse in which people were not just waiting to cut one another down, in which people asked questions and really cared about the answers, without having preconceived ideas about what those answers should be. And at the same time I became much aware of how much I did not wish to participate, because of the responsibility such participation would place on me. I realized at this moment the extent to which these two rhetorical attitudes, irreconcilable as they were, were warring with each other inside me, and that it was a battle which was deeply woven into the pattern of my everyday life. To participate would be truly to choose between the two.

Two different rhetorical attitudes towards an audience: one based in a premise of the value of shared inquiry; the other based in a premise of the importance of winning. Two different attitudes which we carry with us, one or the other or both, when we sit down to write. Which of them we choose makes a difference to how we think about what we wish to say; it is a difference which is altogether crucial.

It has certainly been crucial to me. It is simplistic to talk about this clear division between one way and another when we really know that there are no clear divisions; and yet it is true that for me a misunderstanding that I had about the purpose of writing was for many years devastating to the point that I *could not* write. (How many articles, books and essays have there been in recent years about the inability of American students to write?) Just as I would either fight or flee a conversation about the things I really cared about, so would I in writing pick up a pen as though it were a shield to ward off blows. Still and yet, I often have to write my way through or past a defensive attitude towards an audience before I will permit the words to take a chance at finding their own fullness, to go forth when they are not sure. Still and yet, I start too often with an image of my audience as opponents whom I must

manipulate into agreement because all they are doing is watching for the flaws.

In this image, writing is a predetermined matter: words are fixed, thought is fully known, ideas are simply a commodity waiting to be put into the paragraphs which will sell them. What I must do then, if I am to write successfully, is to make an outline out of these thoughts which I already know and write them up according to the outline and all will be well.

There is one problem: even if I might wish it (and truth to tell, I often do) I can't make this image of thought as a fixed commodity work because it is simply not the way my mind works. Far from being fixed, my thoughts are amorphous and elusive. It is only as I find the words that shape this amorphousness into something concrete that I truly know what my thought is. I may know in a vague sort of way before I sit down to write, just as I know what my fundamental beliefs are — but that is a very different thing than articulate understanding. And that, surely, is one of the major purposes of words — to make articulate that which, before the words were there, was not. An articulate paragraph. Ah, there is satisfaction. There is, just for a moment, order and coherence in the world because of this articulate paragraph that has been wrested out of amorphousness into shape, a coherence in the world that never was before. And never will be again; the next time I talk about the same thing, I will have to discover the thought all over again and the words will be different and so will the thought. I will never be the same as the last time, not ever.

This approach does not go well with the image of a sceptical audience waiting to pounce. Within the confines of that image we cannot really think, because thinking and defending pull the mind and heart in two different directions — thinking towards discovery, new connections, new territory; defending only towards the shoring up of barricades around what is already known. To write defensively is to be in the position of the protagonist in Kafka's agonizing story "The Burrow," who gives all his life and energy for sixty exhausting pages to defending his underground burrow against all comers; he never even comes up for air, because as soon as he shores up his burrow in one place he hears the scuffling of an imminent encroachment in another. Hardly a place in which to do good thinking.

I live my writing life poised uneasily between these two modes, sometimes sliding from one into the other without being aware that I have done so. I can start off with honest

thought and an attitude towards my audience which is trusting, confident that it will listen to me, suspending judgment of what I am saying until it has heard me out; then without realizing it has happened, my trust grows thin and runs out, and then I have the sledgehammer that I have sworn to give up in my hand again, because I am, without realizing it, quite sure that my audience is judging my every word. Recently I showed a friend a piece of writing I was rather pleased with until he asked me which side was he on: Was he a good guy or a bad guy? I was furious, until I re-read what I had written and had to see that he was right.

Because the struggle to stay honest is so difficult and because I am afraid of making a fool of myself if I do not adequately maintain my defenses, it sometimes seems preferable not to write at all. But I know that if I do not solve this problem, the things I wish to say will eat me alive because I have not tried to say them. It takes a leap of faith to believe, *and to keep believing,* in an audience who will listen to what I am saying and will not judge until it hears me out. And the leap from shoring up to trusting is as hard as anything in the world to do because the antagonistic audience is not only outside me in my imagination; if that were the case I would probably not have too much problem with it. No, the antagonistic audience is much more lethal than that because it is in my own head. It is my own judgments, not those from the outside, that paralyze me.

Why is such a personal struggle worth the telling? Because it is far from being just my struggle. I recently asked a freshman class of thirty college students how many of them liked to write, and two hands went up. The fear of an eternal red pencil waiting to strike or a sneering voice making a sarcastic comment seems to be an almost universal fear. It is not *judgment* that is the problem — I don't think too many of us are afraid of good criticism. It is only *premature* judgment, that of an internalized audience whose inclinations towards us are not friendly. It is the same struggle as it is for most of us to stay genuinely open in conversations when we disagree. If we cannot stay open ourselves, it follows that we should assume an audience who is as judgmental as we are.

It is deeply inculcated into all of us, this rhetoric of winning. But why? And how? Why do we subscribe so readily to this rhetoric as though there were no other possibility for persuasion than combat or salesmanship? As though reasoning together, in conversation or in writing, were pure and simply

impossible? It is easy to make our educational system the villain, or our teachers within that system; to say that it is the system which trains us to be combative, that if left to our own devices we would choose a more open mode of communication. It may well be that our educational system is inimical in many important ways to the development of our ability to communicate (indeed I think that it is) but could our system be thus if there were not something in us which was willing to perpetuate it? After all, it is we who take its tenets and make them our own.

Why?

It is hardly a notion that is new with me to say that how we understand the language we speak points beyond itself to how we understand the world, and that we cannot divorce our attitudes about language and how to use it from the attitudes we have about the world. I propose that many of us confuse autonomy and integrity with a entirely self-contained self-sufficiency, and that this confusion makes for a combative stance in the world. Our understanding of rhetoric and its purposes seems to mirror this stance. The belief in the desirability — indeed the possibility — of such self-contained self-sufficiency puts us in the unfortunate position of Kafka's protagonist, ready to shore up our burrows at the drop of a hat. And with this adversarial stance, reason is impossible. Reason can only happen together with each other and in order to reason together we have to allow the boundaries between us to become blurred. There are many of us who do not wish such blurring. So we agree to agree or we agree to differ — it makes no difference. Either way our integrity remains intact and unshaken and the fact that we have learned nothing from one another is perhaps moot. (Perhaps this is even what winning means — not persuading someone else, but remaining intact oneself.) And if there is a voice inside me after one of these encounters which says that there is something rather unsatisfying about our unreasoned agreement or disagreement, I can still it quickly enough. After all, it's only important to know what my values are. Far be it from me to impose them on anybody else. And the voice will be stilled. I have my integrity, and the niggling dissatisfaction is probably only because it's too bad that there are fools in the world who do not agree with me. For surely only a fool would disagree and who wants to be bothered by fools. "Stop," says the voice, interjecting in the middle of my crescendo. "You're missing something. Why do you have to be so righteous about this? If you're so sure

you're right, why not try your reasons in an open forum to see if they will hold?" "Shut up," I say. "Who needs you to shake my equilibrium?" And I shake my head and do my best to deny that my equilibrium is shot anyway.

What does the voice want of me that goes beyond the integrity of my values? Why isn't that enough? Why does it insist that I communicate what I believe?

Why? "Because what you believe is not real save in being tested," says the voice. "No, listen" (as I would seek to interrupt); "yes, you will listen to me now. I have been quiet long enough. What you call your integrity is really imprisonment and the boundaries you hold so dear and will have remain inviolate are false boundaries. You hide behind a wall of certitudes and imagine yourself to possess freedom of thought and you do not know that freedom of thought cannot be possessed, only gained and regained over and over again in open dialogue with others. Your certitudes, which seem to you to be so self-evident, are nothing of the kind; they are merely untested opinions, and as Borges said (God knows, you are fond enough of quoting him) our opinions are the most trivial part of us. And there's another thing. If you do not express your thoughts in the open, you absolve yourself from the danger of having to listen to someone else and maybe having your view modified or your mind changed, don't you? Just look at the world you have made, you and people such as you. Is it a pretty sight, this world of adversaries in which each hides behind his or her particular set of certainties, in which each is perfectly prepared to go to the grave to defend his values, without ever even understanding values which conflict, because he has never really listened to someone who was expressing them? If you are so sure you are right, why are you so afraid that someone else may seek to influence you?"

The voice is growing in volume. It threatens to become shrill.

"Now you shut up and listen," I say. "It is important that I hold to my own values, that I am prepared to fight for them. There are too many people in the world who are not. Let us take a example of an issue: that of capital punishment, for instance. Now there's an issue I'll fight for. But arguing about it simply isn't possible; it's either a self-evident truth that no man has the right to take another man's life or it's not. Nobody's going to change my mind about that; nor am I going to change anybody else's. I know what I think and that has to be enough. And I will fight for what I think."

"Do you?" says the voice. "Do you know what you think?" I start to rise from my chair in protest; but the voice waves me down, and to my surprise I stay sitting. "Spell out for me this self-evident truth of yours," it says. "I assure you I will listen most carefully. And, by the way, why do you jump immediately to the word argue? Argue is only one possible synonym for reason, you know, and not the best one at that, at least at this time in history when argument implies that if one does not win, one loses. I am not asking you to argue your case for me — only to spell it out."

I quiet down. I am afraid that I will not be able to say clearly why I think that no man has the right to take the life of another. I almost plunge into the Bible; but I know that there are quite as many quotes to undermine me as there are to support me, so that won't do me any good. I am aware that I wish to call my position self-evidently true because I do not believe that such values can be discussed, that they are even amenable to reason at all, that I could possibly give reasons for such a position. And yet . . . I squirm uneasily in my chair.

"Let's start with what you're feeling right now. You feel that you can't give convincing and persuasive reasons for your position, is that not so? And you are squirming in your chair."

"Yes," I say. "Both things are true."

"Why are you squirming? If you cannot give reasons, why not let it rest at that and say there are no reasons to be given? Accept that there are no reasons and go in peace."

"But you won't let me do that," I protest.

"Don't put it off on me," says the voice. For a small voice, it's certainly abrasive. "You weren't squirming in your chair on account of me. Let's look at this now; at why you were squirming in your chair. You do not feel that you can give adequate reasons. But is that the same as to say that you feel that there are no adequate reasons? That you just feel the way you feel and that's that? Think carefully before you answer."

"No," I say after a pause. "It's not the same. I do feel that there are reasons for this value that I hold — that I do not believe what I believe merely on a subjective whim. There are the feelings that I have, and underneath the feelings and contained within them are my reasons for those feelings; the feelings and the reasons are a part of one another, but I do not feel that I can say what they are. And even if I could, what I would then say would prove nothing."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. So reasons have to

prove? Isn't that rather confusing? How can you prove something you have not yet discovered?"

My conversation with my voice has started something. It has reached a point which frightens me. "If I have reasons for thinking what I think, why cannot I say clearly and succinctly what they are? Why do I have reason confused with argument? It seems that even to think at all about these questions of value causes me great difficulty. If I start to think about them, the first thought that I have is that these values are so far from being self-evident as I had thought, that there seem to be no words that attach to them at all. But that does not mean that there could not be words. It just means that I must think very slowly and carefully if I am to find them, these words that match and give shape to the reasons that I feel, slowly and carefully enough to avoid the landmines of proof and of consequent confusion. Indeed it is true that I cannot think and prove at the same time; and indeed it is true that the confusion of trying to do so is frightening and chaotic. So I must go very slowly, and somehow if I can discover the words, I will discover the reasons themselves. Without words, all I have is the whim of my passions; but once there are words, I have something objective as well, something which will be shared by some others because it will be something that points beyond my individual capacity to reason. And I yearn for this objectivity. Words shape the world, I think, and give it order. Words are the opposite of the incoherence of which I am so afraid."

"Yes," says the voice, "you're doing fine."

And now back to another speaker at the conference at the University of Chicago. He speaks with considerable command, and yet also with uncertainty. He says that what he is going to say is insufficient; and yet he is very sure of what he is saying, insufficiency and all. It is as though it were not a negative to be insufficient. He engages the audience at once. He lacks the exaggerated flamboyance of the first speaker; he does not feel to be playing to us, the audience. I feel that his attention is focused solidly on what it is that he wants to say to us, and it is on this that I focus too. His paper is careful and thoughtful, as is his manner of delivering it. He does not make unsubstantiated conclusions; in fact, he does not make conclusions at all. Rather, in part his paper is about the process by which one arrives at conclusions: the process by which human meaning and understanding is acquired and inte-

grated and deepened and broadened; the process by which we affect and are affected by each other. He is talking about how he has been affected in his reading by literary criticism. He is a part of the paper he is giving; he never resorts to self-exempting generalizations. In content, in style of writing, and in manner of presentation, both the speaker and his paper seem to be doing what my voice has been advocating. In the most careful way, this speaker is reasoning with us by speaking of the process of the development of his own reason. He does not offer unsubstantiated and facile conclusions which would invite only immediate and thoughtless yeas or nays, as had the first speaker. Rather, he invites us to join with him in an open-ended dialogue.

He makes me wish very much to learn to develop for myself this rhetoric that is so different from the rhetoric of combat; this rhetoric which has its meaning between people, in the speaking and the listening. He makes me wish that I were not so afraid to listen to voices different from mine, lest they would not in turn listen to me. He makes me vow to protect my boundaries less and to listen more. And he makes me want to risk finding the words that would begin to shape my thought and order my world — and to believe that I could find them.

But combat rhetoric dies hard. I wish to make of this non-combative rhetoric a new base for combat. I wish to make of its values a new self-evident absolute truth that only a fool would deny. I will go forth and fight the dragons of combat rhetoric and overcome them in a hand-to-hand combat in which non-combat rhetoric will win. I will fight absolute conclusiveness with absolute inconclusiveness, and this time, because I am certainly right, I will surely win. But the small voice inside my head, stronger this time, intervenes again, halts me in mid-flow.

So easy to go to war. So hard to go to thought. And what if I do? What if I set down my weapons unilaterally? What assurance do I have that someone else will do the same? There is no such assurance. Well, I hope anyway that for me thought will win. But I am by no means sure.

And if I am not sure for myself in my own life, when in my heart I know I want to make the change, then I am a good deal less sure for our culture. The image of a rhetoric of combat prevails everywhere — in our conversations, in our classrooms, in our writing, in our institutions, in our dealings with the other nations of the world. Indeed the trust that is required

for unilateral disarmament of any kind is very difficult. It is so easy to go to war, with righteous flags flying. It is so hard to relinquish the righteousness and go for the risky possibility of shared reason. But we have such very ample evidence, in every arena, that going out to win persuades nobody and only causes escalations and hardened boundaries. So disarmament has to be worth a try. As a teacher at an elementary school in which I was doing some teacher training said: "We've tried everything else; we might as well try teaching them to think."

And because the microcosm is truly a tiny mirror of the macrocosm, at this time in our history when winning is no longer winning, how we decide this issue in our individual lives as we go about the business of the every day is perhaps a matter of survival.

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