

THE POEM AS ARGUMENT

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A poem may be, among other things, an argument. When this is so, the poem enters into the province of rhetoric and may consciously or unconsciously exhibit the traits, categories, and devices of that art. Rhetoric in the original Aristotelian sense is "discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion." The poets of antiquity consciously employed rhetorical methods in their work; even lyric poetry was part of the public province and the intellectual atmosphere of the time was pregnant with rhetorical principles. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was not the only treatise on the subject but has come to be the most influential. Our own age is, of course, an heir to that atmosphere and its tradition. While rhetoric often now has a decidedly negative connotation, in the sense of insidious verbal tricks used to dupe the reader or listener into accepting what he might not ordinarily accept, or of empty words and thin content usually summed up in the disparaging adjective "windy," any argument or attempt to persuade may be said to fall under the category of rhetoric in the original sense, which is how I use it here. When reading some war poems in an anthology, I realized that many of these modern poems concerned with war and the human responses to it are particular cases where the poet is engaged in discovering arguments to employ as persuasive devices. In briefly discussing four or five of these poems, I don't wish to imply that an argument is their *raison d'être* but only to discuss them as arguments. Since they are all anti-war rather than simply about war presumable no modern poem could be (for war), or, in one case, for another's right to be against it, an argument in each poem is implied.

Let me consider first two American poems about conscientious objectors in the Second World War, E.E. Cummings' "I Sing of Olaf" and Karl Shapiro's "The Conscientious Objector." Cummings' poem is about a Scandinavian immigrant's refusal to serve in the American army. Olaf is presented as a northern European immigrant stereotype (blond, "glad and big"), who, though not at all intellectual, was a man "whose warmest heart recoiled at war." The poem is a bitter catalogue of Olaf's suffering and degradation at the hands of the soldiers:

*their passive prey did kick and curse
until for wear their clarion
voices and boots were much the worse,
and egged the firstclass privates on
his rectum wickedly to tease
by means of skillfully applied
bayonets roasted hot with heat -
Olaf (upon what once were knees)
does almost ceaselessly repeat
"there is some s. I will not eat."*

Olaf refuses "without getting annoyed" to kiss the flag and is thrown "into a dungeon, where he died." As there is no attempt to explain Olaf's motives for refusal to serve, the emphasis falls not on his conscience but on his stoical and resolute rejection of unthinking patriotism, an unthought-out opposition to even more ignorant brutality. Other than this simple reversal of values, there is no intellectual argument in the poem: the appeal is emotional, a justification of anti-patriotic feeling through examples of gruesome "patriotism." The tone is ironically light, which increases the feeling of bitterness at this officially condoned outrage. "I sing of Olaf, glad and big" echoes the sort of classical epic that celebrates warrior societies. To the soldiers, Olaf is un-American as well as non-American, but he is, as the poet would have been very much:

in the mainstream American tradition in his insistence on the integrity of the individual conscience and even in his conformity to the stereotyped American physical type:

*unless statistics lie he was
more brave than me: more blond than you.*

There is no attempt in the poem to deal with subtler questions; for example, the justification for refusing to fight in what was, after all, a war against Nazism. Since Cummings is dealing with a type, he can select the details as he wishes and needn't concern himself with the other side of the argument. He gives no reason for Olaf's stubborn bravery in the face of torture and death, but insists only on the courage of Olaf and the cowardice and indifference of his tormentors. The poem therefore appeals entirely to emotion for its argumentative force. The appeal to emotion (*pathos*) is one of the three means of persuasion Aristotle lists in his *Rhetoric*. The pathetic appeal is concerned with producing the right attitude in the hearer or reader. In the Cummings poem, the emotions aroused are anger and a sense of outrage, the right attitudes to have about cruelty in the guise of patriotism.

Shapiro's poem, "The Conscientious Objector," employs *pathos* but also uses the other two means of persuasion, the ethical appeal (*ethos*) and the appeal to reason (*logos*). The poem first deals with the American public's hatred toward the C.O., "the bloodlust sweating from the public heart," which is the whole content of Cumming's poem. In Shapiro's final stanza, however there is a change:

*Well might the soldier kissing the hot beach
Erupting in his face damn all your kind.
Let you who saved neither yourselves nor us
Are equally with those who shed the blood
The heroes of our cause. Your conscience is*

What we came back to in the armistice.

Here the appeal is ethical: The C.O. saved no one as the soldiers did, and they even hurt themselves, since they were imprisoned, but their choice was still a moral one. Granted that a C.O. will be hated, his conscience is what guides his actions and is all that sustains him while he languishes in prison, for he has apparently betrayed both his country and himself. The appeal is also partly to reason. It is the moral conscience, specifically that of the C.O.'s, which should prevail once the war is over, as it is this conscience which is the only antidote to the bloody memories and lingering rancor of war. Although Cummings merely attacks authority for condoning or even participating in such savagery as torturing men of conscience, Shapiro does not shy away from the complexity of the issue. He seems to realize that if all men were C.O.'s the war could not be fought, and if the war were necessary then even good men would be conquered and suffer by default. Yet Shapiro affirms the necessity of pacifist opposition in a hostile world. It is for the qualities of a man who suffers for his ideals that makes the C.O. equally a "hero" with those who died, perhaps more so, since their sacrifice was often made without understanding the reasons for it. Understanding, not willingness to follow orders, is a more valuable commodity in the establishment of peace.

The strength of the ethical appeal in the "Conscientious Objector" is contained in the pronoun "you," which refers to the poet Robert Lowell, who was imprisoned for being a C.O. The argument of the poem is as much a gesture of sympathy and praise for Lowell as a piece of persuasion against misguided chauvinism. That is to say, Shapiro takes a more affirmative approach than Cummings. The tone is not bitter but understanding and sympathetic. The poet, or his persona, establishes himself as a man who was not a C.O. but a combatant (he

says "we" to refer to those who fought overseas), and therefore gives himself the right to praise a man who was. The reader is positively affected, since the poet is defending an action which he himself did not undertake but thinks worthy of praise. If the poet had been a C.O., self-justification would have destroyed much of the moral force. And since he has created a poem based on the actions of a real person, his authority is greater than that of Cummings, who invented a mythical type like Olaf for the sake of his argument. It is not that types may not have their own kind of authority, but that the tone of the poem is enhanced by the knowledge that the poet has not invented or arbitrarily shaped what he is deploring. Olaf does not have to be real, but he must seem so; we must believe in him if he is to affect us.

When logic is employed in prose it may take the form of enthymeme, the rhetorical equivalent of syllogism. The writer draws a conclusion from a combination of stated or implied premises, which is similar to, but looser than, the full syllogism of formal Aristotelian logic. Poetry often states the premises of an argument and leaves it to the reader to draw the conclusion, as is appropriate to a "denser" artistic medium, but some poems use enthymemes as well. Wilfred Owen, perhaps the best English poet of the First World War, employs something like it in his poem "Arms And the Boy:"

*Let the boy try along this bayonet blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.*

*Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.*

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.

*There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.*

The poem is not devoid of appeal to *pathos*, even sentimentality: the teeth made for "laughing round and apple" or the thickness of the boy's curls. We can, however, easily pick out the logical procedure of the poem, which initially establishes the inherent malice in weapons. The blade of the bayonet is "keen with hunger of blood" and the bullets "long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads." The major premise is something like: whenever the physical possibility of a violent act is present, its actualization is likely to follow. An antithesis is then established, contrasting the boy's reason for being with that of weapons. He does not have the tooth and nail of the ferocious animal equipped to tear apart its prey; his teeth are not made for biting but for the innocent pursuits of laughing and eating fruit and his fingers are "supple" and clawless, made for delicate and non-violent manipulations. The minor premise is that there is no malice in the physical make-up of the boy (his essence does not precede his existence, one might say) that programs him for destruction. The conclusion is not stated, but in putting the two ideas together we may suppose that there is something else in human beings, not their bodies or their natures, that causes them to make war. The last stanza provides hints for what may have gone wrong. His teeth "seem" to be for laughing, but appearances may deceive. Claws are not hidden but presumably may be substituted by weapons, like bayonets, that tear flesh with more efficiency. If God will not give man talons or antlers for the purposes of attack, he can develop his own in the way of machine guns, tanks, and rocket launchers. The argument is even stronger in the nuclear age, when even these terrible weapons seem as innocent as the claws and talons of animals, compared to the atomic "marvels" of man's demonic genius.

Another famous poem of Owen's, "Dulce et Decorum est" illustrates another kind of logic. The poem begins with the grinding, slogging suffering of the foot-soldier:

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge...
Men marched asleep. Many lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod.*

Suddenly, there is an attack and the poet paints the nightmarish picture of a man dying from poisonous gas:

*... yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.*

*In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

We suspect Owen's conclusion even before he is to state it. A scene is described which is the very antithesis of romantic notions of glory and war: grinding suffering and horrible deaths. The final stanza makes a pathetic appeal to the reader's humanity in the face of such horror and an implied ethical appeal in his own outraged feeling at witnessing the man's death:

*If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues...*

The rhetorical equivalent of induction is the example. Often, several examples in a poem are the basis of a less specific conclusion, since concreteness in poetry is more effective than generalization. Owen's example, however, is highly charged enough to allow him to make an inductive leap to a generalization in the last four lines that leads the reader to strong agreement. The poem continues from the conditionals above:

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

The real refutation of the Roman poet Horace's verse ("It is fine and fitting to die for one's country") is in the juxtaposition of such a noble-sounding phrase with the hideous example of a man to whom it really happened.

Another fine blend of all the means of argument is Stephen Spender's "What I expected." The poet first tells what he did expect, a respite between exhausting battles. Subsequently, he tells of what he found to be true, the gradual "weakening of the will." It is implied that the reader would expect the same things as the poet, yet the latter's particular experience allows him to say, with disillusioned restraint (ethos), that he, and therefore we, could not see beforehand that war would be anything like it really was. A strong pathetic appeal is made with specific examples of what he found: "Cripples pass with limbs shaped like questions." Finally, he reiterates his theme, giving it a new dimension:

*For I had expected always
Some brightness to hold in trust
Some final innocence
To save from dust...*

In summary, the war poems which have been discussed take a point of view and attempt to persuade the reader to accept it through a variety of devices, such as the rhetorical equivalents of logic, the personal appeal of the author or persona, emotionally loaded figures or examples. An ironic tone often aids the effect, as in Cummings' poem or in two poems I have not discussed, Henry Reed's "The Lessons of War - Judging Distances" and "The Naming of the Parts." The more didactic poems can temper the lesson with irony, but the most effective way of presenting the poetic argument seems to be a skillful combination of the various means and the particular strength of each appeal.