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The Conditions of Eloquence

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Goodman's is a thoughtful discussion of the importance of eloquence, or "skilled speech" (10), for politics. He offers nuanced portrayals of Cicero, Burke, Macaulay, and others wrestling with the possibilities of eloquence under changing circumstances. Most of the subjects of these chapters were themselves involved in politics—and hence were reflecting on and honing their own rhetorical practice as much as contributing to rhetorical theory. Goodman insists on the importance of rhetoric's "stylistic abundance"—"a quality of language in excess of argument" (13).

But the analytical heart of the book is better captured by its subtitle: *Eloquence and Its Conditions*. Running through Goodman's treatment of the historical episodes are two unifying threads. One is an account of eloquence as an "emergent property" (10) of (certain kinds of) rhetorical relationships. The second is an account of how eloquence fits into broader political, social, and cultural structures. Goodman mediates both claims through the concept of decorum. "Spontaneous *decorum*" is his term for the eloquence that emerges from, or is the "aesthetic counterpart" to, "healthy rhetorical relationships" (10). Goodman also takes up the "problems of *decorum* on the largest scale: issues not of fit between specific words and a particular rhetorical situation, but between broad norms of speech and large-scale political, institutional, and cultural conditions" (15).

Goodman aims to offer an account of what we could call the micro-foundations of eloquence, analyzed as a property of certain kinds of relationships between orators and audiences, coupled with an investigation into the macrostructural conditions under which eloquence, and healthy rhetorical relationships, live and die. His book thus takes on big questions, and does so with modesty and circumspection. His cases are well chosen to illustrate the possibilities for eloquence under changing macro-level political, social, and technical conditions, including Rome's transformation from republic to principate and the rise of nineteenth-century mass politics.

Here I focus on his micro-level claims. Goodman offers a number of relevant considerations regarding healthy relationships between orators and audiences. Rhetorical relationships, if necessarily asymmetrical, should

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nonetheless be "equitable" (5). Healthy rhetorical relationships are characterized by a kind of reciprocity (7), a sharing of vulnerability and burdens, in which both orators and audiences have something at stake in the encounter (6): the audience opens itself to the possibility of persuasion, while the orator faces the possibility of rejection or worse. Seeking to summarize his core claim towards the end of the book, he writes that eloquence is an "emergent property" of those rhetorical relationships "characterized by mutual risk" (184). In emphasizing relationships, Goodman seeks to reorient us away from the question "Is this or that an instance of eloquent speech?" to "Is this the kind of speaker-audience relationship from which eloquence tends to emerge?" (10–11).

Goodman's focus on rhetorical relationships is helpful. But to speak of a rhetorical relationship as healthy implies a political standard, or even a form of political functionalism. Lurking here, I suspect, is an interesting theory of the political, one that I wish Goodman had made more explicit. We can see perhaps the negative contours of Goodman's fundamental political commitments in his provocative claim that an ideal emperor cannot truly be eloquent (79–80, 164–65). The emperor's monopoly on power and authority is the problem: "A figure . . . who permanently transcends political competition . . . simply cannot make a bad speech. Or rather, the category of 'bad speech' does not apply to an emperor" (80). On Goodman's account, if the emperor cannot make a bad speech, he cannot make a truly eloquent one, either. While Goodman focuses on the relationship between orators and audiences, it is clear from his invocation of competition that the relationship between orators themselves is also crucial for his argument: "if the orator exists at such a rarified distance from the audience *and from other potential speakers* that their speech cannot truly go *wrong*, it cannot truly go *right* either" (165, emphasis added).

Goodman gives a structural analysis of eloquence's dependence on certain rhetorical relationships, but his claim that only some relationships are healthy is implicitly normative. Plausibly, underlying his argument are ideals of contestation, openness, and/or political freedom. Clarifying the fundamental political commitments behind his discussions of healthy rhetorical relationships might enable us to see new linkages between the political and rhetorical styles of Greek democracy, Roman republicanism, and certain versions of liberal parliamentary democracy (three cases discussed in the book). For all their differences, do the traditions of radical democracy, republicanism, and liberalism share a contestatory political framework, within which eloquent political speech is made both possible and functional for healthy politics?

I am also not convinced that Goodman's account of the micro-foundations of eloquence explains all cases of the phenomenon. Consider his discussion of a passage from Schmitt's *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, which tries to analyze the enabling conditions for Bishop Bossuet's eloquence: His eloquence "is only possible against the backdrop of an imposing authority, which lapses neither into a discourse nor a dictate but finds resonance in

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the architecture of speech. . . . All of this presupposes a hierarchy because the spiritual resonance of great rhetoric derives from the belief in the representation claimed by the orator."[1] Goodman counters that Bossuet "is incapable of eloquence for the same reason that Quintilian's figure of the emperor-orator. . . is incapable: because the authority surrounding his speech is so imposing that he speaks without uncertainty or the possibility of failure" (165).

Let us accept that if there were really an orator who spoke without "the possibility of failure" we would hardly expect him to speak eloquently. Schmitt remains a useful foil for Goodman precisely because they are trying to explain the same thing. When Schmitt writes that Bossuet's eloquence "finds resonance in the architecture of speech" and seeks to find the source of the "spiritual resonance of great rhetoric," he, like Goodman, is attuned to a "quality of language in excess of argument"; Schmitt's "resonance" is Goodman's "aesthetic counterpart." Yet Schmitt's explanation of eloquence adverts not only to a (hierarchical) relationship but also to the claim that great rhetoric resonates with its audience—i.e., is perceived as eloquent—in part because the audience believes "in the representation claimed by the orator."[2]

This important point might explain our ability to perceive the eloquence of historical speeches, even though we are not really in a rhetorical relationship with long-dead orators. When I read a speech by Frederick Douglass, I presumably experience his eloquence very differently than his direct audience did. And the stakes for me are very different than they were for him and his audience. But if I can nonetheless experience his speech as eloquent, it is perhaps because I believe in the "representation claimed by the orator"—in this case, in the ideals of freedom and equality that Douglass effectively represents. Schmitt's account leaves room for ideals such as freedom and equality, and even an idea of "the people," to count as the kind of representations capable of sustaining great rhetoric.[3]

Goodman has identified some of the features of rhetorical situations that call forth eloquence: orators need to persuade, and if they did not they would have less cause to aim for eloquence. But I am not convinced that being in the right kind of rhetorical relationship with an orator is a necessary condition for our experiencing his words as eloquent. As Schmitt argues, words may resonate for us just when we recognize the power of the ideal that the orator invokes.

[1]Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 24. Quoted in Goodman, 162–63.

[2]Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 24.

[3]Ibid., 21.

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