

## NON-ARGUMENTATIVE RHETORIC: ASPECTS OF ZEN RHETORIC

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**Abstract:** This work aims to investigate on a meta-theoretical level the conceptual framework of rhetoric. Two spheres can be distinguished: the argumentative or persuasive rhetoric and the non-argumentative or non-persuasive rhetoric. Tracing the contemporary theoretical trends in the rhetoric field, we propose an alternative version of conceptualization. Using both the feminist invitational rhetoric and the comparative rhetoric, we propose an integrative synthesis. The alternative is found in the Buddhists texts and practices. Among the non-argumentative aspects of language we mention: negation, contradiction, silence, the story or the paradox. We believe that these elements of our daily life are worth emphasized and encompassed in an integrative perspective. It is possible not to evaluate.

**Keywords:** feminist rhetoric, comparative rhetoric, Zen rhetoric, non-argumentative, non-persuasive.

### 1. A tea experience

On the very day I decided to write this work my fiancée and I had received several long awaited products and teas from abroad. Besides the teas we ordered, there was also a smaller red pack. After having a taste of tea and having used the gaiwan and the fine porcelain cups on the new bamboo tray, one first natural reaction was to write an email to the seller (a Hungarian) to thank him for the precious products and also ask him what sort of tea it was, ask about its name and especially the preparation method of the one we got as a bonus. He answered very kindly, offering us new information and advice related to the preparation of some of the oolong teas we ordered and insisted on telling us that the preparation of tea resides in gestures, in elegance, in the sensibility of each consumer and the particular relationship he or she establishes through the cup with the tea leaves. Yet, he said nothing about the mysterious tea in the red pack. I was disappointed about my “supplier”’s lack of professionalism and his entrepreneurial assets. Later that night I understood (or I thought I understood). The moral: by the subjective character of the tea ceremony the Oriental refuses the “benefits” rendered by rationality to the „detriment” of non-rationality. How remote is this conclusion from the frenzy manifested by the modern Occidental man in knowing, imitating the complicated stages of a so-called tea ceremony in Asia and the fervour with which he scrutinizes the thermometer or the clock face or, lately, the chronometer on the mobile phone in order to visualize the temperature and time the duration of the infusion. Instead, the Asian does not measure or count when preparing the tea, but he approximates. While the Occidental rhetoric teaches us how to make use of our

intellect, the Oriental rhetoric or the Zen doctrine and practice teaches us how not to use our intellect.

## **2. The feminist rhetoric**

Such story-telling is typical for the latest changes in the field of rhetoric, it allows us to investigate on a meta-theoretical level the conceptual framework of rhetoric. In the contemporary theoretical debate two trends can be grasped: the feminist rhetoric and the comparative rhetoric. We will further try to briefly describe both of them and emphasize the common points between them and present our approach.

The feminist rhetoric tries to find and answer to the question: "Is there a rhetoric that does not have persuasion at its core?" Next, the rhetoric meditation should answer the following question: "What replaces the privileged persuasion?"

We can distinguish two milestones in the feminist thinking on rhetoric: on the one side the concept of rhetoric as conquering by Sally Miller Gearhart and on the other side the vision of an invitational rhetoric by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin. What unite the feminist rhetoric are the protest and the opposition towards the standard rhetoric dominated by men in the field of rhetoric.

According to Gearhart the model of conquering and converting of human interaction is the one that dominates the entire masculine rhetoric. The conversion is an act of violence that resembles a violation. Practically, when the conversion is successful the convert is conquered with the justification that the conversion is a good thing for him/her and not a good thing for the conqueror. By breaking the existent balance, "forcing" itself into others' problems the rhetoric is aggressive, violent. In transforming, in the womanization of rhetoric, Gearhart proposes a less violent communication, a theory for supporting the information and helping of the others: "Communication can be a deliberate creation or co-creation of an atmosphere in which people or things, if and only if they have the internal basis for change, may change themselves..." (Apud. Herrick, 2013, 89). We can suggest an alternative solution or that of a non-persuasive communication that emphasize the differences between the communicators.

Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin have later proposed a new rhetoric theory which they named "the invitational rhetoric", where the speaker is not set to or does not expressly manifest the intention to persuade. The two authors are oppose the standard masculine rhetoric, that "does not recognize the possibility that the members of the audience be satisfied with the systems of belief they have developed, be fulfilled with themselves and not feel the need to change" (Apud. Herrick, 2013, 95). The model proposed by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin is an invitation to understanding; through the invitational rhetoric the speaker is no longer aiming at persuading his/her audience at any cost or by having in mind this precise purpose, but he/she is the one who invites everybody in the audience to step into his/her world and manage to see the things from the perspective of the one speaking.

Therefore, we can say that the feminine perspective in rhetoric, by examining the standard rhetoric, makes us aware of a certain masculine monopoly and encourages us to find solutions that satisfy and reflect the perspectives of all people, not only those of men.

### 3. Comparative rhetoric

The initiator of the comparative orientation in the rhetoric domain is George Kennedy. In the introduction of the classic translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the classicist offers a memorable definition of rhetoric as being "the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions" (Apud. Herrick, 2000: 7). Rhetoric has an evolutionary basis that derives from the genetic conservation of species: "rhetoric is a natural phenomenon: the potential for it exists in all life forms that can give signals, it is practiced in limited forms by nonhuman animals, and it contributed to the evolution of human speech and language from animal communication" (Apud. Herrick, 2000: 112).

Comparative rhetoric tries to show that worldwide there are different manners of rhetorical manifestation. In other words, the comparative rhetoric movement intends, by presenting other rhetoric different from the Occidental rhetoric, to eliminate a model that has monopoly. It consists of a model that has at its core a history of rhetoric that traces its roots back to Ancient Greece. This model should be acknowledged (not canonized) as a possible, legitimate alternative of rhetorical manifestation. It is the role of a new direction in the study of theories of rhetoric to confer importance to other forms, meaning other traditions of manifestation.

The Western rhetoric tradition, as seen by Kennedy, mainly built by men, predisposes the European and American citizens to consider the discourse based on arguments as a main fundament of rhetorical discourse. Furthermore, the traditional discourse fosters the authority of a single speaker, namely of the person who, apparently, possesses the information or knowledge.

After he examines the Native American, Australian-Aborigine, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Mesopotamian or Aztec rhetoric traditions, Kennedy compares them to Western or Occidental tradition, which is mostly Greek. Some of his conclusions are worth mentioning: "Generally speaking, throughout the non-western world, rhetoric was used for agreement and conciliation, and emotions are looked upon as bad taste, except the grieving of the dead" (Apud. Herrick, 2000: 128). The Greek oratory is characterized by personal invective and discordant argument or by the use of lies, if lying is more efficient than telling the truth in a public speech. As Occidentals we institutionalized, we made official the practices of Greek rhetoric, or at least a certain perspective: "Greek orators were characteristically quarrelsome and emotional, inclined to better personal attacks on each other, highly resentful of such attacks on themselves but tolerant of verbal fights by others. Alone among ancient civilizations the Greeks also developed competitive athletics." (Apud. Herrick, 2000: 134).

Although methodologically Kennedy does not criticize any tradition or form of rhetoric, we may think of alternative solutions of the ancient Greek rhetoric. One such alternative to the argumentative model, centred on competition and on the majority's agreement, can be found in the Orient, where non-violence and the absence of competition are appreciated.

#### 4. Aspects of Zen rhetoric

Is the conception of a non-persuasive and non-argumentative rhetoric possible? Is there a rhetoric that does not try to convince that something is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, useful or useless? Is a rhetoric beside the axiological assumptions possible that is to say one through which we plan to evaluate the world, the others and ourselves? Or, as said by Margaret Syverson (2011: viii), the person who inspired this meditation: "But what if there were a different, equally «real» way to talk about the world and each other? What if we believed that each person is quite capable of waking up to the reality around him or her and responding appropriately, without being converted to some position or belief we share? What kind of language would we use, and how would we use it?"

In order to answer these questions our approach makes use of both the feminist rhetoric and the comparative rhetoric. On the one side, it borrows the idea of an investigation that avoids applying the concept of "persuasion", and on the other side it borrows the idea of researching cultural traditions other than the classical – the argumentative-Occidental one (European or North-American). We believe that one possible access into a truly new rhetoric era (Herrick, 2013: 135) can be made by following a special rhetoric, the Zen rhetoric. We think that the Zen rhetoric satisfies both prerequisites of the new rhetoric of the new millennium.

Etymologically, the word "Zen" derives from *zenna*. The concept originates from the Sanskrit word "dhyana" and the Chinese "chan". All these notions have the meaning of "concentration of the spirit in silence" (Simu, 2007:197). What today we know as Zen is represented by two schools of Japanese Buddhism, Rinzai and Soto, and other five with fewer adherents, like Fuke, Hogen, Ingyo, Obaku and Ummon.

The various schools of Zen are all proclaimed from a fundamental text, the *Lankavatara* sutra. Still, we have to specify that the Zen opposes itself to any doctrinal thinking, "Zen does not regard Scriptures in black and white as its Canon, for it takes to-days and tomorrows of this actual life as its inspired pages" (Nukariya, 2005: 66).

In Zen, just like in any other form of Buddhism, every individual comprises within himself the nature of Buddha, translated as "the illuminated one". Therefore, the illumination can occur at any moment: "Zen training begins by kicking the props out of our customary ways of understanding and talking. It subverts value distinctions, challenges our habitual ways of expressing ourselves, and denies the superiority of rationalist, linear logic. It does not do this merely to "deconstruct" language, or to tear down all meaning. It has a radical project of waking us up out of the trance we create

for ourselves and others through our habitual uses of language” (Margaret Syverson, 2011: vii).

Before discussing aspects of Zen rhetoric let’s take a look at a short story named *Learning Zen*:

One day, the province governor asked the Zen Master Taigu: “It is said that *the Blue Cliff Record* is the first Zen writings; is that true?”

Taigu answered: “Yes, it’s true.”

The governor asked: “Please tell me one or two of those writings.”

Taigu answered: “I am afraid you might not be able to understand.”

But the governor kept asking, so, eventually, Taigu said in a loud voice, reproducing the first Zen saying in that book, “Void is not really void”.

Then the governor said: “I don’t understand”

Taigu replied: “I told you you were not ready” (XXX, 2001: 40-41).

In brief, among the main principles and characteristics of Zen rhetoric we can mention: the story, the surprise, gesture, silence, contradiction, negation or paradox. These aspects of Zen rhetoric do not intend to convince us that reality, the others or ourselves are in a certain way, but to makes us aware or bring us to reality.

Just like Chinese rhetoric practice, the Japanese rhetoric practice or Zen was codified and transmitted rather by creating stories charged with lessons - fables or short stories – compared to the Greek and Roman handbooks (Herrick, 2013: 123). Zen teachings are more often encountered in short stories, haikus and koans than in special essays. In other words, Zen converges with artistic forms of manifestation rather than with those strictly scientific.

Another characteristic form of Zen rhetoric is the surprise. Compared to the linear-Occidental rhetoric, which favours the planning and detailed organisation of discourse, Zen focuses on the unusual, on nonlinearity. The surprise has the role of awakening the disciple, to make him forget his old ways of thinking and talking, thus making him aware of the reality around him. The surprise or the wonder have the role of awakening “the wide-eyed” from the sleep of daily ignorance.

The fact that in the Zen rhetoric a disciple needs several years to receive the teaching (rarely the illumination), it is an evidence that the Zen master does not resemble the Western contemporary eloquent orator. Silence is a much more used method in the Orient: „You have to ask yourselves for what reasons and with what purpose you want to speak. If your reasons are not excellent, if your intentions aim at gossip or desire to seduce or boast about or other purposes that are not respectable, then it is better to keep quiet or let up” (Deshimaru, 2013: 31). The role of the Zen master is not to persuade the disciple to the “good” way but to let him find his own way. There are things we cannot talk about, that cannot be expressed or understood, namely that cannot be grasped by means of our language. Still, even if all our scientific problems, the ones we can talk about, were solved, our life would not be happy. But we cannot talk about the sense of life; we are in a mystic area and we have to observe the boundaries separating the sense of new-sense or over-sense.

The gesture implies doing an action, taking part to it and not theorizing. The gesture may send us to the above Wittgensteinian distinction between saying and showing, between sense and non-sense. In opposition with the Augustinian picture of language, as the philosopher would put it, the Zen masters are the ones showing the problematic relation between reality and language when they underlie the fact that language is only the “finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself”. As in *Tractatus*, in Zen as well, the sense cannot be named but only showed. One must not watch the finger, but the place towards which the Zen master’s finger points to.

In fact we talk about a paradoxical communication that cannot say anything, that has no sense when spoken. We are at the borders of paradox, of a communication in non-communication. By definition the paradox is a form of expression opposing common opinion. The paradox is the one showing the limits of human rationality, the fact that it cannot explain everything, the fact that it cannot gather everything, the fact that it must stop: “If you clench your fists, you’ll have two fistful of sand. If you open your palms, then the whole desert shall thread through your fingers”, as an aphorism says. Zen might have found a favourable territory in Japanese, where there is almost no grammar, namely an environment or a language “you understand mostly from the context and by intuition than by a rational analysis of words and syntax” (Takashi, 2010: 118).

Contradiction and negation are key features of Zen rhetoric. The teachings of Zen masters seem cryptic or disorienting for a Westerner used to the rigours of rationality and formal Aristotle’s logics as a knowledge “highway”. For our Western culture to say that something is and is not at the same time means a typical infringement of the non-contradiction principle. To say that B in a relation of opposition with A is either true or false, but that there is also a third possibility, represents a violation of the principle of the excluded third. All our thinking, science and implicitly civilization lie on these logical principles. Zen practices these rhetoric forms exactly to show the limits of our reason, to make us get out of the “prison” of classic logic, of the way of seeing things which lead our daily life. In fact, it is mind which “darkens” the reality in front of us. It is from here that comes the Wittgensteinian saying with strong Zen accents “do not think, just look”. That is not to conceptualize, not to build theories but to regain the naivety or innocence of a genuine, initial look. For Zen trainees the “initial mind”, the beginner’s mind is more important than the mind of the expert, which is one who operates dually. As master Shunryu Suzuki (2012: 22) said: „In the mind of the beginner there is a multitude of possibilities, but in the mind of the expert, there are very few”.

Before the end, we would like to mention another short Zen story called *The rain of flowers* which tries to artistically summarize the message of Zen rhetoric:

“Subhuti was Buddha’s disciple. He was able to grasp the force of void, the point of view that nothing exists beyond the subjectivity and objectivity relation.

One day Subhuti was sitting under a tree, in a sublime void status. Flowers started to fall on him.

- We praise you for your speech about void, the Gods whispered.

- But I did not speak about void, replied Subhuti.
  - You did not speak about void, we did not hear void, the Gods whispered.
- And the flowers fell over Subhuti like a rain" (Reps and Senzaki, 2009, 42-43).

Opposed to the „golden rule” of competition, that leads the rational religion of market economy, Zen does not consider that the „principles of ethics, such as compassion, altruism, solidarity or generosity have to be considered as superstitions from the past” (Villalba, 2009: 148).

## 5. Conclusions

Argumentative or non-argumentative rhetoric influences human relations in general. The non-argumentative Zen rhetoric is not an introduction into the practice of Zen but the meta-theoretical development of a rhetoric alternative. Zen rethoric as a special multicultural communication may be conceived as a different method of using language to build meaning and to develop relations. The non-argumentative rhetoric influences the conversational dynamics and influences the social and personal changes in a new manner as compared to our Greek Occidental tradition. It does not evaluate. The main discovered characteristics of non-argumentative Zen rethoric are: narration, astonishment, gesture, contradiction, negation, paradox and silence. Eventually if the Western rethoric by argumentation and persuasion establishes a competition model, the Zen rethoric proposes an alternative, non-competition model, empathically using language to acquire wisdom, to avoid suffering and to offer compassion.

We consider that Zen rethoric succeeds, to a certain extent, to follow the road opened in philosophy by Ludwig Wittgenstein. For the Austrian thinker the task of philosophy is therapeutical, that is to show the conceptual confusions we make when we communicate: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein, 1967, 47). Or better said, Wittgenstein goes the Zen way.

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