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Robert Paine

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Smallwood: Political Strategy, and a 'Career' of Rhetoric

ROBERT PAINE

FEW WOULD QUARREL with the suggestion that through developments in the political arena one may be able to trace the 'career' of a political idea, perhaps in association with the 'career' of a political party or, indeed, the career of a leading politician. Thus the political career of J. R. Smallwood is associated with the political idea of Confederation and *its* 'career'. What I wish to demonstrate here—building upon my two earlier essays in *Newfoundland Studies* (Paine 1986; 1985)—is how the idea of career applies forcibly to the *rhetoric* of the politics of the Smallwood era.

First, I look at the peroration of what became known as Smallwood's "ballot box speech" which he delivered in community after community in the last two days before each of the two referendums in the summer of 1948 (see *I Chose Canada* pp. 300-05). I have a particular reason in mind. I want to look at this as an early example of what I have identified (in a discussion of Smallwood's 1959 IWA speech) as *interlocutory rhetoric*: ". . . a particular rhetorical structure or technique favoured by Smallwood . . . one whereby he imparts to his audience the sense of a conversation, albeit one that is entirely in his hands. . . . There is an element of *mediation* about it, and this is crucial to the whole rhetorical process" (Paine 1986:192). In the ballot box speech, we find an interlocutory structure but it is employed in a *different mode* from the IWA speech.

Second, I look at the difference between the interlocutory rhetoric of 1948 and 1959 in order to develop the idea of a politician's speaking career. The case-history of Smallwood shows how, far from being a matter of chance, this can be a product of political calculation over how to grasp, and

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then to maintain, political power. So the 1948-1959 comparison enables us to reach towards a diachronic overview of political strategy and its rhetoric. In these terms, Smallwood's career proceeds through metaphor and metonymy to synecdoche.

THE BALLOT BOX PERORATION, 1948

The Text

> Well, there you are, alone in that little polling booth, you and your conscience. The choice is clear: Responsible Government as it existed in 1933, or Confederation with Canada. . . .
>
> You ask yourself, 'Will I mark this X for Responsible Government as it existed in 1933?' And you say to yourself, 'Yes, I'll do it. I'm no namby-pamby—I'm tough, I am; I took it before, and I can take it again. I starved before, and I'm willing to starve again. I ate dole bread then, and I'm prepared to eat it now. I pulled in the belt in 1933, under Responsible Government, and I'm willing to pull it in again, and take whatever they hand out to me. I'll vote for Responsible Government as it existed in 1933!' And with that, before you change your mind, you take the pencil and mark that X.
>
> Then you fold up the ballot paper. . . . You've made your choice. You walk out of the polling station and make your way down the road to your home.
>
> And as you go down the road, you meet a little boy, or a little girl, coming toward you. If you have a conscience at all, you'll stop and you'll say, 'Little boy (or little girl), I make my apology to you. I have just betrayed you. I have just voted for Responsible Government as it existed in 1933—the dole, the dole bread, the tuberculosis and the beriberi. I was able to take it; I pulled in my belt—now it's your turn. I don't see why you should get off any more than I did and other children did in 1933—but all the same, I suppose I should make my apology for condemning you in the polling booth today.'

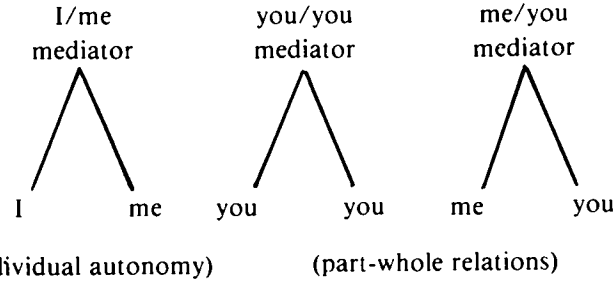
Smallwood himself comments "I improved on the speech as I went along the shores of Conception and Trinity Bays, and I imagine that I reached the ears of 15,000 or 18,000 voters, and the hearts of well over half of them. . . . It was a very emotional tour, and in some places, I could see tears in the eyes of the many who crowded about my car and me. Of course, there were the inevitable few places where I was heard in stony silence. This, with scarcely any variation, is what I did in the last two or two and a half days of the two referendum campaigns." Following, as it did, close upon the first campaign with its inconclusive referendum, the second campaign that same summer was "a cruel ordeal" and "the slightest wrong word might have lost us thousands of votes" (Smallwood pp. 303, 305).

Analysis

By the time of the IWA strike, Smallwood wore the mantle of a political figure behind whose words—if persuasion failed—were the authority and power of the state. But in 1948 he had to persuade or fall. His persuasion rested upon a vision (about identity and security) proclaimed on behalf of each Newfoundland household, and to embrace the vision implied individual acts of faith on the part of his many thousands of listeners: he chose his words so as to awaken the *self-awareness* of each man and woman who was to go to the polls.

This was more of an innovation in the conduct of a political campaign than it might appear to be: politicians are prone to use you/you and me/you interlocutions with the intent of impressing upon us how we are all enmeshed in a network of dependency upon others and how, as a collectivity, we are therefore dependent upon a central mediating figure (the politician). The 1959 IWA speech was distinguished by its brilliant use of this mode of interlocution. It was used in 1948 too, especially by his political opponents but also by Smallwood. However, in the last days and hours of the campaign Smallwood himself switched to I/me interlocution. This helps a person to be an object unto himself (G. H. Mead 1934); instead of impressing part-whole relationships upon him, it should enhance his sense of individual autonomy. Plainly put, the person is made to think about himself, about his own role in his own destiny, about his own responsibility for what happens as a consequence of his actions.

Fig. 1 Interlocutory Mode



Smallwood intuited that it was along this latter course that his best chance lay in 1948, and he determined to make his audiences aware of

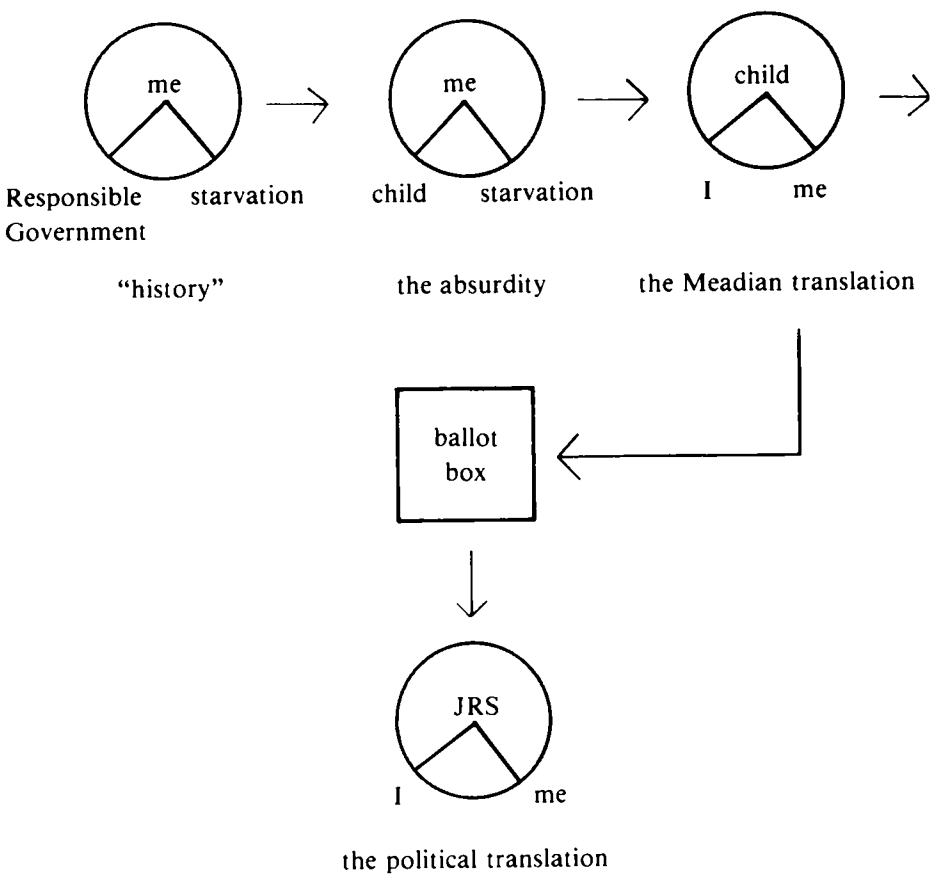
the public legitimacy of their self-interests, instead of "interests" identified for them by politicians. "You will not be voting to 'give Ches a chance,' " he said in a mocking reference to Chesley Crosbie's campaign use of the traditional me/you interlocution.[1] And added: "Don't bother about me or Ches or anyone else—you bother about yourself tomorrow" (Smallwood p. 302).

But he still had to see that his audience determined their self-interest 'correctly.' Politically, this meant that he had to arrange matters so that they would eventually identify him as the keeper of their consciences (and this had largely become the case in 1959, the IWA notwithstanding). But *to be seen* as wishing to become that—at this early and delicate stage in his political courtship with the "ordinary people" of Newfoundland—could be to court failure. Any such sign by Smallwood, at that time, would have edged his rhetorical relationship with his audiences back to the traditional (à la Ches Crosbie) me/you interlocution. As we have seen, the device he fell upon—elegantly stated, unerringly aimed—was to have a child as the keeper of his rural audiences' conscience. Smallwood, as *agent provocateur*, pushed the voters into explaining themselves to the child.

One notices that to obtain the pathos of the meeting with the child, Smallwood first introduces Responsible Government as a proposition that has ensnared his audiences. On the one hand, he playfully attributes to it the power of dismal inevitability based on Newfoundland political experience, but on the other hand he reveals it as an 'absurd' proposition.[2] "I starved before and I'm willing to starve again!" Several conclusions are left to be drawn by each audience: that the absurdity is rooted in their lack of political will; that this lack of will springs from entanglement of a traditional kind of pride with traditional fears.

Smallwood had spoken before of these things during the campaign; what he presses upon his audiences on this occasion is their own moral error in this absurd tradition. For it is in its name that one would tell a child: "I pulled in my belt—now it's your turn." By intruding the child in this way, Smallwood intends to make his audiences consider the consequences of conscience should they vote against Confederation: "If you have a conscience at all, you'll stop and you'll say, 'Little boy (or little girl)[3] . . . I have just betrayed you.' " Here we see the Meadian self-as-object in operation. Thus enabled to recognize the moral error, the people may be expected to wish to correct it.

Fig. 2 Interlocutory sequence of 1948 and the emergence of I/me



So Smallwood leaves his audiences (on the eve of polling day) with their children as the mediating symbol—or *materia medica* perhaps—of his political message. (The interlocutory sequence is presented in Fig. 2) With Confederation a political fact, Smallwood himself overtly assumes this key role and enjoys its mana—it is as if the mediating symbol changed from being a child to being a parent.

DIACHRONIC OVERVIEW: 1948-1959

There are these three important developments in the Smallwood rhetoric:

1. from you/you to I/me (1948) and back to you/you (1959) interlocution
2. from metaphoric to metonymic relations; and
3. from an ostensible concern with Newfoundland identity to the exercise of political control.

Closely interrelated as components of an unfolding political strategy, these eventually place Smallwood in a position of rhetorical power over his provincial audiences based on synecdoche.

To recapitulate briefly: so that they could respond to his claim to lead them in the 1946-48 campaign, Smallwood brought Newfoundlanders to a new kind of awareness regarding their political identity: the awareness of self as an object unto itself (I/me). Telling them to break with the traditional political relationships of dependency and placing a vision before them (Confederation), Smallwood himself assumed, at that time, a metaphoric *persona*: he was 'like' Confederation. Even so, he was chary of certain consequences of metaphor as a political instrument and, wherever possible, appealed also to the place that metonymy has in Newfoundland's cultural relations. By 1959, the political image of Smallwood was post-metaphoric; he 'was' Newfoundland. Now the political master of the country, he closed (with few exceptions) its social and political structure to further metaphors; and the kind of political awareness he urged upon those who were now his 'subjects' stressed the multiple interdependencies between all Newfoundlanders (you/you) and the ultimate dependence upon himself.

The challenge that the IWA 'rebellion' presented to Smallwood's position of preeminence is shown by his temporarily 'stepping down' (in the IWA speech) into a metonymic relationship *with* the loggers (me/you). He did so to demonstrate his own legitimacy, and on that basis renewed his entitlement to preside over all labour relations in the province. Most important of all, the way in which Smallwood was able to quash the seemingly powerful

IWA provided a fail-safe demonstration of the consolidation of his power by that time. This mastery of his public is recognizable in the quality of his rhetorical relationship *over* them (you/you). It is that of *synecdoche*, subsuming both metaphor and metonym.

We can follow Burke (1969; 1957) for the placing of synecdoche among the tropes of rhetoric. Whereas metaphor expresses "perspective" and metonymy "reduction," synecdoche encompasses the "basic process of representation" (1969:503); there are multiple and bilateral substitutions and associations: in addition to "part for whole" (as in metonymy) there is "whole for part"; in addition to "thing contained for the container" (as in metonymy) there is "cause for effect" (1957:65). Thus Burke sees what he calls the perfect paradigm of synecdoche in "the identity of 'microcosm' and 'macrocosm' . . . where the individual is treated as a replica of the universe, and vice versa" (1969:508).

The significance of synecdoche, for us, has to do with the concentration and entrenchment of power, out of which may even emerge an 'apotheosis' of the rhetorician: he stands for both the whole and any part of it. He epitomizes his people. He assumes iconic qualities (cf. Eco 1976:191f.). In the achievement of this effect a notable technical aspect is the sense of relational completeness that is conveyed over and above the closeness of metonymic relations. (Structurally and figuratively 'above' the metonymic relations into which Smallwood had successfully led his public, his attainment of those of synecdoche is a consequence of these relations.) There is completeness in the sense of a rhetorical paradigm but also of social control in which the merger is achieved between what a politician wants his audience to hear and what they want to hear. The achievement is on his terms; the politician becomes the medium (that is, the mind) through which we interpret the world. As Sapir (1977:21) said of this rhetorical armament: "synecdoches will suggest the whole, though from a particular angle."

DID THE SPEECHES PERSUADE?

The reader may well take this to be no more than a rhetorical question. Yet it is all too easy to suppose that because a politician has an audience, people retain what he says.
Consider:

> . . . perhaps usually, the effects of performances, while intense at the time and place of their production, fade with disconcerting celerity as soon as the participants leave the 'theatre'. . . . It is the classic problem illustrated by Flaubert's

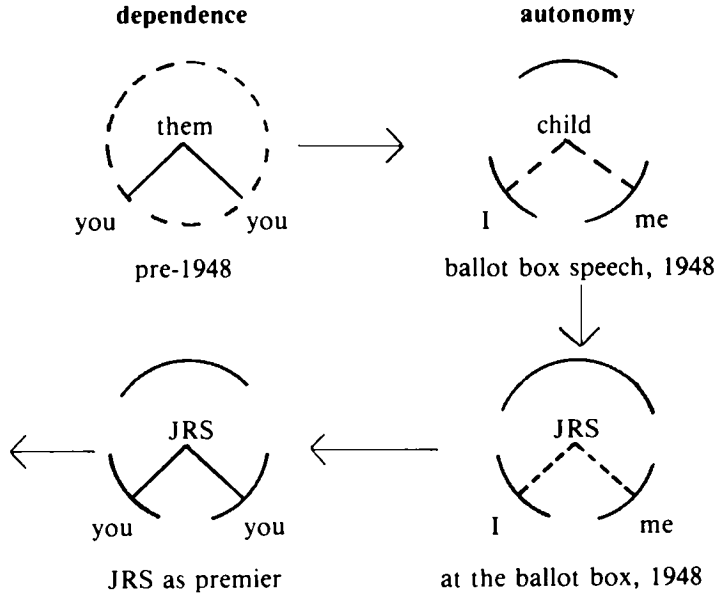
> *Madame Bovary*: Emma reads a book and immediately rushes out to *do* what it is *about*—she is almost literally seduced by action-value involvement. . . . More 'sophisticated' enthusiasts of literature can open the book, read it, and close it to go about their merry, disturbingly independent way: unalloyed selection-value prevails" (Boon 1973:20).

In the case of Smallwood, he was, surely, as good as Flaubert and his early Newfoundland audiences were (on the whole) like Emma. But who listens *and heeds* depends, in another way as well, on who is speaking—for it may be a "big man" (in the sense of influential, powerful, charismatic). Some "big men" avoid the oratorical arena (Mayor Daley of Chicago) and others recognize that they must try to make the best of it (MacKenzie King); still others make that arena a centre of political action and victories first won rhetorically have an important place in their battle strategies[4]—Smallwood was this last kind of "big man." There has been a shyness in anthropology about studying "big men"—a shyness over naïve psychological theorizing; I hope I avoid this by paying attention not to Smallwood's make-up but, instead, to his approach to the "ordinary people" who drop their votes into the ballot boxes.

There is an additional point to be noticed about this. Before obtaining power, his use of I/me interlocution freed the voter from his or her traditional dependence on patrons and privileged authority, enabling the voter to enjoy at least the illusion of autonomy on his or her way to the ballot box. However, in the use of you/you interlocution after obtaining power, there is a return towards *status quo ante*: the unity and bonding of the people becomes, in the main, once again a function of patronage and privileged authority. In his IWA speech, Smallwood put the matter otherwise of course: his message was that all Newfoundlanders are involved in part-whole relationships with each other. Nonetheless, there was this approximate metonymic sequence about that: We are each other. You (loggers) and you (fishermen) are each other. *You all are part of me* (Paine 1986:209). Smallwood, then, was equally the part completing the whole and the whole itself to which each part reaches for its own fulfillment.

In Fig. 3, I have tried to incorporate this rather elaborate development of power which I find expressed in Smallwood's interlocutory rhetoric. The gradation from broken to unbroken lines indicates, along the circumference of the circles, degrees of oneness, and along their radius, the strength with which mediation is exercised. The relation of the one factor to the other is always worth noting. Thus the pre-1948 mediation fails, for all its strength, to evoke oneness of identity; but at the ballot box in 1948 this relationship

Fig. 3 Diachronic summary of Smallwood's interlocutory strategies.



between the factors is reversed: there is a subjective sense of autonomy —from which bonding and commitment also flow—experienced by the voters. In the post-1948 situation (tending towards *status quo ante* in its reversion to you/you), Smallwood exercises considerable control over the aspirations of "ordinary people" (a favourite Smallwood phrase) but the sense of oneness (via Smallwood's strong mediation) is less than whole.

As a closing comment just this. The association of rhetoric with political strategy raises the general question of the gap—never closed in modern society—between the macro- and microlevels of political structure and activity. One would like to know the role of rhetoric in this regard. In the case of Smallwood, at the same time as his rhetoric threw temporary bridges across that gap, it was also an instrument for keeping the public "behind" and himself out in front. In short, he saw that his rhetoric was seen by the ordinary people as serving their interests even as it served his own. What is left to consider is his demise as a political rhetorician. Here the intrusion of TV and, not least, of a studio interlocutor, in the person of Geoff Stirling, will emerge as critical factors.

Notes

[1]Chesley Crosbie, a buccaneer entrepreneur of the period, was campaigning for Economic Union with the United States and a campaign slogan was "Give Ches a chance."

[2]See Ellul (1965) for the use of the 'absurd' in rhetoric.

[3]This substitution is important as Smallwood liked to bring children up onto his podium—and hold a little boy (or little girl) by the hand.

[4]This is exemplified in *The Last Hurrah*; the "authentic" novel about Mayor James M. Curley of Boston (O'Connor 1960).

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