Radical Rhetoric
and American Community

*Threnody for Sophroyne*

People always think well of speeches adapted to, and reflecting, their own character: and we can now see how to compose our speeches so as to adapt both them and ourselves to our audiences.

—Aristotle, *Rhetorica*

Now nothing in oratory, Catulus, is more important than to win for the orator the favour of his hearer, and to have the latter so affected as to be swayed by something resembling a mental impulse or emotion, rather than by judgment or deliberation.

—Cicero, *De Oratore*

The orator indeed is obliged to adapt himself to his audience if he wishes to have any effect on it and we can easily understand that the discourse which is most efficacious on an incompetent audience is not necessarily that which would win the assent of a philosopher.

—Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*

On May 2, 1996, Billy and Ruth Graham were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. In remarks entitled “The Hope for America,” the Reverend Graham looked backward to George Washington, the first recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal, and forward to the “Third Millennium.” Though a message of hope, Graham’s short speech was full of the darkness of the moment:

rational and ethnic tensions that threaten to rip apart our cities and neighborhoods; crime and violence of epidemic proportions in most of our cities; children taking weapons to school; broken families; poverty; drugs; teenage pregnancy; corruption; the list is almost endless. Would the first recipients of
this award even recognize the society they sacrificed to establish? I fear not.
We have confused liberty with license—and we are paying the awful price.
We are a society poised on the brink of self destruction.\textsuperscript{1}

Dire as the warning is and prominent as the platform from which it was
given, what is most notable about Graham's jeremiad is its lack of notability,
receiving not even so much as a remark in the \textit{New York Times}. The
complaints suffer the contempt of familiarity; the phrasing, in the current
climate, is pedestrian; and perhaps, coming from this source, it is all simply
too predictable. The news here lies in the fact that such an ominous
portent, delivered by a man who has occupied a significant place on
the public stage for as long as any American now living, should be so
commonplace.

Such pronouncements have long been the steady fare of the so-called
religious right, enjoying greater and lesser degrees of credibility as the
fortunes of the country—and the fortunes of individual Americans with
it—have waxed and waned. Today, however, these \textit{topoi} have become
rhetorical staples of the left as well, the lamentation over, in Todd Gitlin's
phrase, \textit{The Twilight of Common Dreams}:\textsuperscript{2} Treatments range from the esoteric
and rarefied—Gertrude Himmelfarb's \textit{On Looking into the Abyss},\textsuperscript{3} which
makes contemporary literary theory its \textit{bête noire}—to the decidedly prac-
tical—\textit{Miss Manners Rescues Civilization from Sexual Harassment, Frivolous
Lawsuits, Dissing and Other Lapses in Civility}.\textsuperscript{4} The common issue in these
various productions is the perceived erosion of any ethical basis for "civil
society," or "civic virtue," the "common good," the usurpation of the life
of the citizen by privatized, selfish interests. As Gitlin describes it,

In the land of the free market, civil society, the fine mesh of self-organized
groups and initiatives is embattled. The public square, formally open, is
usurped by private concessions. Meanwhile, among the general population,
it becomes harder to see citizens motivated by obligations beyond their
immediate circles. Institutions of public discourse—the press, political par-
ties, vital trade unions, serious books—have become the concern of minori-
ties.\textsuperscript{5}

"Little by little," Gitlin warns, "our cultural infrastructure seems to be
coming apart along with the bridges and roads."\textsuperscript{6}

If there is a trace of reason left in the universe, someone, somewhere
must be smiling, even amidst the overwhelming dolor, to hear Professor
Gitlin sounding so like the Reverend Billy Graham. Thirty years ago, Gitlin
and his associates on the New Left would have been, as they were for many,
the object of Graham’s criticism, the engine of the cultural doom. In a 1968 review of Abbie Hoffman’s book *Revolution for the Hell of It*, Jack Newfield contrasted the traditional liberal values of “reason, democracy, tolerance, and truth,” to Hoffman’s “distortion, violence, chaos, and mindless action.” Justice Abe Fortas expressed the view that what was at stake was no less than the formal processes which make society possible. In his first inaugural address, Richard Nixon, who had run on a law and order campaign, characterized the “difficult years” of the 1960s as ones in which America had “suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading,” and he urged us to “stop shouting” and to “speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices.”

In these assessments, admonitions, and pleas from both the Sixties and the Nineties, radical speech, unmanly rhetoric, is a symptom, a harbinger of a more extensive disorder. It strikes, explicitly in Fortas’s caveat, at something essential to our social organization. The failure of communication, recognized by both critics and defenders of the radical stance, is taken as signaling a failure of community. The phrase “civil society” itself, expressing our preference for the mannerly, the courteous, the amenable, the proper, is contrasted to the decay of process we sense around us. There is a widely held belief that the ties that bind us are eroding. We are alarmed by what we see as the rise of force over reasoned discourse as “the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified.”

Robert Bellah and his colleagues have framed the problem as one where the language of individualism has run amuck, mutated, and become anarchic, obliterating the moral language of duty and commitment that makes the *polis* possible, and Lee C. Bollinger questions the benefits of a free speech principle so broad that it allows “extremist speech” to strike “more and more deeply at the personal and social values we cherish and hold fundamental to the society.” The production of eulogies for civil discourse in America has become a minor industry.

The parallels notwithstanding, there are important and potentially informative differences between Franklyn Haiman’s “Farewell to Rational Discourse” (1968) and Mary Ann Glendon’s diagnosis that our political discourse has been “impoverished” by a faulty and undisciplined conception of rights. Haiman and other observers of the Sixties mourned a society apparently being torn apart at the seams, an act of violent division,
perhaps an excess of definition. Glendon and her colleagues, on the other hand, address a diffusion of responsibility, a loss of definition. Billy Graham’s talk of ripping, and weapons, and breakage, and destruction, for all its incipient violence, is peculiarly unfocused. There is no clear defendant in his indictment. He merely points to an “almost endless” list of symptoms. The story lacks a compelling villain. Even the recent bombings in the United States confirm this reading in their lack of attachment to a cause, their seeming senselessness and lack of meaning.

The real lesson is the lesson of license conceived as licentiousness—things fall apart—it is the unraveling of Gitlin’s “fine mesh,” each thread establishing its independent claims. This theme weaves it way through Jean Bethke Elshtain’s analysis in which she refers to “corrosive forms of isolation, boredom, and despair; the weakening, in other words, of that world known as democratic civil society, a world of groups and associations and ties that bind,” the “disintegration” of “social webs,” the “thinning out” of the “skein of obligation,” and “the unraveling of democratic civil society.” Fraying is not violent rending.

The persistent confusion lies in the common disregard by both forms of destruction of the social fabric for “civility.” Elshtain reveals something of the root of this confusion in her celebration of the rhetorical legacy of ancient Athens. Rhetoric is the discourse of the public being, of the citizen, and Elshtain observes that the achievement of the common good depended, not only on the deliberative outcomes in the assembly, but also on the “day-to-day relations of Athenians with each other,” related to what Thomas Cole refers to as “the rhetoric of tact and etiquette.” Robert Hariman articulates the relationship of rhetoric and manners through the classical notion of “decorum,” which he defines as consisting in “(a) the rules of conduct guiding the alignment of signs and situations, or texts and acts, or behavior and place; (b) embodied in practices of communication and display according to a symbolic system; and (c) providing social cohesion and distributing power.” From the time of Aristotle forward, the tradition of public discourse in the West has been one of civility, diplomacy, compromise, and negotiation. In the United States, the connection between rhetoric as a mode of persuasion and rhetoric as civil behavior is most evident in those public speaking texts published circa 1900, which often represented themselves as guides to both public speaking and etiquette. In 1902, the author of The American Star Speaker and Model Elocutionist wrote,
It is a duty imposed at birth to make the best use of every talent of which we are possessed; it is equally a duty to make ourselves as agreeable in our intercourse with our fellow creatures as our opportunities may permit. Politeness, coupled with an attractiveness of manner, is the passport which admits us to the favorable attention of our fellow men.²¹

The etymological propinquity of “manners” and “manipulation” suggests something of the relationship between the preferred nature of rhetorical discourse and its goals.

Public discourse in this tradition assumes the existence of a community of mores, common operating assumptions, shared values, even as it seeks to rebuild, reinforce, and redirect that community. Indeed, the orator has often been seen as a central figure in cultural life and the state of oratory a significant measure of cultural health. James Boyd White only puts into contemporary language a Ciceronian conception of the role of oratory in society when he defines rhetoric as: “the study of the ways in which character and community—and motive, value, reason, social structure, everything, in short, that makes a culture—are defined and made real in performances of language.”²²

In such a conception, the rhetor becomes “representative” of his or her public, a usage reflected in our most common appellation for public officials. And just as the rhetor becomes representative of his or her public, the rules of rhetoric become synecdochal for the rules of society. “Fair speech,” whether presented in The American Star Speaker and Model Elocutionist or elsewhere, reflects, in Kenneth Burke’s formulation, “the individual person striving to form himself in accordance with the communicative norms that match the cooperative ways of his society.”²³ The failure of this process, or worse, the rejection of it, is taken as a signal of the disintegration of society itself, the abandonment of the accepted rules of speech a portent of incipient chaos and the abandonment of the rule of order generally.²⁴

Yet, Rosa Parks’s refusal to surrender her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, is not the same as the belligerent occupation of a seat for two by a disaffected youth on a Chicago el at rush hour, and a critique of incivility that fails to recognize this distinction misses an essential difference between the threats to comity of the 1960s and those of the 1980s and 1990s. Further, I will argue, it misses the lessons that the American radical tradition holds for our current disquietude.

The recovery of a radical tradition in American public discourse, a tradition characterized by a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives
of its audience, a rhetoric in extremis, indicates something more complex than the breakdown of order; it indicates an alternative order, a rationality not accounted for in the Graeco-Roman model. A recrudescence rhetorical form entails a stable response to a recurrent historical situation, intimating the kind of discernible relationship among elements in a rhetorical situation constitutive of a genre. Criticism of rhetorical genres, in turn, presupposes a logic underlying the shape of discourse. Such criticism is predicated on an accountability of discourse to the salient forces that have shaped it. A radical genre is not without rules, but its rules, of necessity, are shaped in large part by its significant opposition to the status quo. What we really mean when we complain about the lack of respect for process in radicalism is the lack of respect for our preferred process, a process that reinforces the situation that the radical seeks to change.

The notion of a rhetorical tradition includes and extends the idea of genre to encompass those forms that have been consciously fostered within a culture. Consideration of the traditional aspects of genre encourages questions of development and evolution, and since they, in turn, suggest a point of origin, consideration of a rhetorical tradition proffers the possibility that the genre may be located in a nascent, primitive historical form, a form in which features and outlines were still firmly connected to the cultural features that engendered them. To speak of genres as subjects of evolution brings us close to the relationship between the generic and the genetic, and makes perfectly reasonable the proposition that rhetorical traditions should retain vestigial elements that, unless understood in historical context, obscure the functions of the genre.

Such is the kind of explanation I have undertaken here as a perspective on some of that discourse in American history that has been characterized as "radical," "extremist," or "revolutionary," because of its failure to adopt its audience's frame of reference. Because its essential form appears to be both recurrent and stable, it cannot be reduced to the vagaries of the particular situation or of individual maladjustment. Before we can disqualify such rhetoric, we must first seek its sources in our culture.

The thesis I shall argue here is that the primitive source for much of the rhetoric of reform in America has been the prophetic books of the Old Testament. It seems an obvious connection given the prominence of the Bible in American culture, and there have been some studies that have traced influences of the Bible in our national life and on our public discourse in particular. Many of these studies might be considered studies of allusion, appraisals of the use of the content of a key cultural document.
Sacvan Bercovitch’s influential work on the American jeremiad as a genre is an exception.\textsuperscript{30} Even Bercovitch’s work, however, is concerned, as its title indicates, with an American rhetorical creation, not with the form of prophetic speech as it appears in the books of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{31} Consequently, he refers to his jeremiads as “political sermons,” the genre of priests and preachers, not prophets.\textsuperscript{32} Old Testament prophecy operates in a different mode and is based on different epistemological assumptions than our public rhetorics derived from the Graeco-Roman tradition.

Assessing the reform efforts of another time and another place, Matthew Arnold once characterized the methods as conforming either to the ideal of “sweetness and light” or to that of “fire and strength.” “Sweetness and light” is the ideal of our received rhetorical theory; its source, said Arnold, is Hellenic. “Fire and strength,” on the other hand, is Hebraic in origin. Though in many ways antithetical to one another, both stand in opposition to anarchy, that state in which everyone is absorbed in “doing as one likes.”\textsuperscript{33} As Arnold expressed it: “The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience.”\textsuperscript{34} In this respect, Arnold’s analysis is more precise than many of those in the present, which tend to regard both “fire and strength” and anarchy as destructive forms of incivility.

Rhetorical critics have been prevented from seeing as clearly as Arnold did the possibility of the continuing influence of the Bible on social action for two reasons. First, we have received no systematic theory of rhetoric from the ancient Hebrews. The prophets of the Old Testament left us with a considerable body of discourse, but they were not theorists and were not prone to spend time examining or articulating the assumptions on which their discourse was built. The failure of the prophets to provide a theory is a gap in our understanding of them and of ourselves that has only begun to be rectified in our own time.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, the theory that we are likely to find implied in the rhetoric of Old Testament prophets will be foreign and alien when compared to our accustomed theories. As Michael Fox has stated, “In Israel we have a well-documented major rhetorical movement entirely independent of the classical tradition from which Western rhetoric and rhetorical criticism descend.”\textsuperscript{36} And Arnold’s characterization of the Hebraic ideal as “fire and strength” suggests that it is not only foreign but also uncomfortable. Consideration of the prophetic aspects of discourse, then, has presented itself as an undertaking both unfamiliar and difficult.

Yet the “fire and strength” of the prophets is as much a part of our cultural inheritance as is the “sweetness and light” of the Greeks, and it is
sheer folly to think that we can have an adequate explanation of radicalism in our culture so long as we ignore a discursive tradition marked by obvious similarities to those discourses we today term “radical,” the influence of which is often attested to by the radicals themselves in their allusions and quotations.

A second reason, I would suggest, that we have avoided explanations that have their roots in anything like prophecy is our embarrassment at the prospect of considering seriously claims of divine possession or consecration. In our everyday usage, we acknowledge the possibility of something like a religious commitment at the base of radical social movements: we talk of revolutionary “faith” and “zeal”; we refer to radical leaders as “prophets”; and we analyze radical rhetoric according to its “God terms” and “devil terms.” At the same time, while we admit of the existence of some blatantly “messianic” or “millennial” or “revitalization” movements that have unmistakably religious roots, we are also victims of our own enlightenment and generally prefer explanations of a more secular order. This in spite of the fact, as George Bernard Shaw, humbling himself before the self-conception of Saint Joan, once reminded us, that “the nineteenth century, and still more the twentieth, can knock the fifteenth into a cocked hat in point of susceptibility to marvels and saints and prophets and magicians and monsters and fairy tales of all kinds.” “The proportion of marvel to immediately credible statement in the latest edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica,” he went on to say, “is enormously greater than in the Bible.”

Approaching the study of a discourse, the ultimate premises of which cannot be verified by conventional means, demands that we suspend, at least for a moment, our modern tendency toward rationalized incredulity and humble ourselves before what we understand only incompletely.

Here is the element that completes the triad initiated with the discussion of “community” and “communication” above. That third element is “communion.” A community must find its rules in some common authority. The authority by which we seek to circumscribe radical rhetorics, to bring them from the realm of “fire and strength” into the realm of “sweetness and light,” to make them agreeable, the authority reflected in the criticisms of the protests of the 1960s by Haiman, Newfield, Fortas, and Nixon, is the secular authority of reason. Similarly, the authority invoked by Gitlin, Himmelfarb, Glendon, Elshtain against the anarchy of the 1980s and 1990s draws on the process orientation of the liberal democratic tradition. Reason is demystified—that is, it can be completely articulated; reasons can be given—and it describes process rather than content. There is ostensibly no
leap of faith in reason. In politics, the rule of reason is expressed in the rationalist metaphor of the social contract. Robert Bellah has argued that in complex societies, "the legal order in some significant measure becomes a substitute for the religious order." Thus an arrangement allows "matters of ultimate religious and moral truth" to be declared "essentially private." Money becomes the source of our public bonds. As Burke notes,

Money endangers religion in that money can serve as universal symbol, the unitary ground of all action. And it endangers religion not in the dramatic, agonistic way of a "tempter," but in its quiet, rational way as a substitute that performs its mediating role more "efficiently," more "parsimoniously," with less "waste motion" as regards the religious or ritualistic conception of "works."

The consequence of such rationalization is that moral criticism is discredited, or at least deemed inappropriate in the public sphere. Social reform efforts are evaluated in terms of resource or rational exchange models, as, for example, reflected in William A. Gamson's description of influence: "Carrying out influence involves making commitments which place a future call on one's resources. The transactional cost of influence is the cost of fulfilling obligations contracted." The language of economics makes incomprehensible all claims based on ideals. Consider the marked disparity between the number of Americans generally favorable to the notion of equal pay for equal work and those favorable to the larger goals of the feminist movement.

There is no communion in money; it is the great metonymy for private property. Radicalism, in contrast, is defined by its concern with the political roots of a society, its fundamental laws, its foundational principles, its most sacred covenants. It is common for radicals to claim to be the true keepers of the faith; they oppose their society using its own most noble expressions and aspirations. A rootless society, a society where the power of once compelling ideas has atrophied, has no basis for authorizing radical activity. When General Motors' Mr. Goodwrench declares "Your car is your freedom," the solution to oppression is to buy and maintain an automobile (furthering insulation and rootlessness).

As I will argue in the following chapters, ours is a society that no longer recognizes radical activity for what it is. The failure of community is signaled, not by the rudeness and stridency of protest, but by the loss of a common faith in fundamental ideals and the loss of the long historical conversation in which these ideals were molded, preserved, and defended.
That the content of this conversation is derived largely from the liberal tradition of John Stuart Mill and John Locke has been well documented, but the prophetic form that unites much of that discourse in its more extreme manifestations has not been.

In the six case studies that follow, I have sought to examine the fundamental assumptions of prophetic discourse and to seek an understanding of the ways in which those assumptions have manifested themselves in the rhetoric of radical American reformers. In this endeavor, I have no claim to being a scholar of the Bible, nor need I make such a claim for my purpose here. Although I have borrowed heavily from biblical scholarship in my efforts to isolate those features that are salient to the prophetic message, I am less interested in scholarly debates over the fine points of biblical criticism than I am in the prophetic tradition as it has been received and generally understood and imitated by Americans.

The following chapter, the introduction to part I of this study, attempts to adumbrate a theory of prophetic discourse based on its origin in the divine word, the prophetic logos; its psychosocial situation, the prophetic pathos; and the prophet's personal mode of validation, the prophetic ethos. This chapter represents an initial assay of the shape and function of each aspect of prophetic discourse with reference to the Old Testament prophets themselves. What is sought is an articulation of the direct relationship between prophetic rhetoric and the cultural assumptions that engendered it. In this set of relationships is the most basic understanding of the discourse.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore the appropriation of prophetic forms by American reformers. Each of these chapters is a case study in one of the text-context relationships of prophetic discourse, though it is assumed that each of these relationships could be found in any of the discourses: the self-evident truths of the American Revolution are a particularly suggestive study in the relationship of the prophetic logos to absolute truth; Wendell Phillips's condemnation of slavery, with its caustic energy, provides insights into the sources of the prophetic pathos; and the martyrdom of Eugene Debs is a model of the prophetic ethos.

In addition to permitting the drawing of analogs between American reformers and Old Testament prophets, the chronological ordering of the chapters allows us to see something of how a prophetic tradition developed in America. If the Old Testament prophets did not inspire each generation of reformers anew or in vacuo, how did their tradition become assimilated into an American tradition of radical reform? How and to what degree
does each successive generation of radicals influence the rhetorical resources that are available to the next and the expectations of future audiences?

Part II of this study turns to the problem of public reform discourse in an age bereft of absolute principles. Beginning with chapter 6, having defined the most basic characteristics of the prophetic tradition or voice, I am interested in exploring the difference between its essential and nonessential attributes. In order to possess critical utility, a generic construction must be definitive; that is, it must not only be able to define the qualities of what is included, but it must be able to make meaningful exclusions; it must be able to distinguish the genuine article from the impostor. The postmodern era is widely regarded as a time of the negative. Todd Gitlin characterizes it as "a prolonged cultural moment that is oddly weightless, shadowed by incomplete revolts, haunted by absences... in general, by the erosion of that false and devastating universality embodied in the rule of the pyramidal trinity of Father, Science, and State." Gitlin and Graham may be worlds apart in their evaluations of what has been lost, but there is a high degree of consensus that it is gone, and that we have found nothing yet to replace it. Radical discourse understood in terms of biblical prophecy has no potency in such a world. The shift parallels that in the Old Testament from a community that could be called into being by a prophetic reassertion of the covenant and the apparently forsaken and rootless aggregation to whom the message of the apocalypse was directed. Part II of this study looks at three possible avenues for a reform discourse with the power to command the assent of a significant public in a world deprived of principles.

The rhetoric of Joe McCarthy has often been referred to as radical, but that position has never been held without opposition, even in McCarthy's own day. His rhetoric, though audacious, never clearly defined its position in the manner of genuine radicalism. McCarthy's entertainment of a chaotic world in which judgment was suspended partakes of the literary genre of fantasy and has parallels with the devolution of Old Testament prophecy into apocalyptic. Robert Welch, like McCarthy, was widely hailed as a radical. His tactics were often compared to the tactics of those on the extreme left, yet we sense that there is a profound difference between a Robert Welch and, for example, a Eugene Debs. The similarities are undeniable, but one suspects superficial. Perhaps more interesting still is Welch's relationship to McCarthy since the two were publicly associated, but again, there is the strong suspicion that Welch was no more a McCarthy
than he was a Debs. Welch provides evidence that he self-consciously aped the form of prophecy as he found it in nineteenth-century poetry, and in Welch's rhetoric we are able to look at the surface divorced from its animating source, a kind of autopsy.

Finally, having formed some relatively clear idea of the tradition's shape and its parameters, the last case seeks to highlight its features through contrast and to make some preliminary assessment of the rhetorical worth of the prophetic voice by comparing the possibilities it contains to the possibilities available in the traditional consensus view of rhetoric. What happens when a reform movement in a postreligious world capitulates and embraces the thoroughly secular, rationalized discourse of its time? Gay liberation, again a reform movement often held to be radical, is the subject of the last study, chosen because, although its programs have been characterized as radical, it has been decisively excluded from the argumentative premises of the prophetic voice, having no claim on the most prominent historical sources of authority: religion, science, and the law. In fact, I argue, gay liberation has attempted to make its argument by pushing the pluralistic, adaptive assumptions of traditional rhetoric to their limit. The comparison of the Hebraic and the Hellenic ideals in situations of contest should further our understanding of the function and place of prophetic discourse. It should also say something about the state of community in America.