

Argumentative strategies in the epideictic discourse of Elie Wiesel

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Abstract

The article presents the various rhetorical strategies used by Elie Wiesel in arguing his own position in a double dialogue: first with the audience, and indirectly with decision-making forces worldwide, secondly, with history. With discretion, but at the same time with argumentative force, he brings before the public the image of the suffering he experienced directly in the concentration camps and, constantly returning to the theme of people's indifference towards it, he expresses his hope that the said experience will not be repeated in the future. He succeeds in persuading the audience and at the same time impressing them deeply both through various types of discernible arguments and through rhetorical strategies conducted with sophistication, discretion and detachment. His inclusion in Simon Sebag Montefiore's anthology to which I have constantly referred to (*Speeches that changed the world*) is fully justified: the well-articulated, balanced argumentation, through the visible exploitation of ethical and affective resources, cannot, and it should not be left without echo in front of the two types of public to which it was addressed (contemporary and timeless).

Keywords:

credibility of the orator; logical arguments; quasi-logical arguments; ethical arguments; emotional arguments; argumentative strategies; figures of speech; the dual nature of the recipient; persuasion.

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1. The improvement of argumentative techniques and strategies (not only through theoretical refinement, but also through continuous exercise, according to the intended purpose) represents one of the necessary and absolutely essential desires of those involved in public life within democratic regimes. This truth has been ascertained since Greek-Roman antiquity; back then, the periods of democracy could constitute spaces for carrying out such activities. Not only scientists (rhetors), but also practitioners (orators) are living proofs of concerns essentially directed towards the discovery of truth and its persuasive transmission. The permanence over time of ancient rhetorical treatises, the echo over time of various concrete oratorical approaches, the model that they came to constitute make useful any preoccupation with careful study of the discursive structuring mechanisms of messages; as such, any study, any concrete analysis of the corresponding palette of strategies seems useful and with concrete benefits both culturally and didactically. Therefore, in the present article I propose to approach the creative laboratory of one of those educated, it seems, at the school of Greek-Latin oratory; having the painful privilege of having directly participated in crucial events in modern history, he stands in a court that takes a stand against what he considers to have occasioned the events to which he refers, the deportation of the Jews. Skillfully handling various discursive and argumentative strategies, skillfully playing with the distances in time, he manages to make his message known and deliver a formal speech that has the chances, as I try to illustrate, to remain anthological, enrolling in the rich tradition not only of instrumental oratory but also, desirably, of deliberative oratory.

2. Especially the crossroads moments of life with deep consequences on personal destiny are preserved *sine die* in the consciousness of those who experienced them. Even if they all leave a deep mark on us, only some of us manage, through various and random contests of circumstances, to bring them back, at a smaller or greater distance from the respective zero time, in front of those who show a certain interest in learning details about them; in that context, the intentions and response of the former are varied, taking, in relation to their reason, a form that is either narrative-descriptive/ memorialist, or didactic-moralizing. Both categories of actors of this often engaging, not infrequently painful show, for some through the anamnestic approach of lived experiences, for the others, through empathic participation, enter a game whose effectiveness depends on the oratorical qualities of the speaker and their effect on the audience.

One of the historical moments that left deep traces on an individual level (but also collectively, through social and political mutations) as well as on the level of mentalities was the holocaust, a phenomenon researched extensively and in depth from multiple perspectives not only by historians, but also philosophers of history. Regardless of the purposes of its study, any objective and verifiable information regarding any of its manifestations and consequences can only serve, by adding some details, to the recovery, in the last instance, of the historical truth. If the data come from a contemporary, whether he is a direct participant in the phenomenon

or a historian, they are all the more precious as they bear the imprint of personal, direct experience, of living, total participation, being, as such, freed from the inevitable deformation (through the possible omission or through the inherent detachment) that the act of retrospection implies. Recorded in writing, they implicitly take their place among the creations of artistic literature; presented directly, in the form of a speech, regardless of the manner in which it was prepared, they are reborn most of the time as they were experienced, nostalgic, pleasant, gratifying or, on the contrary, painful, tragic, but always alive. The discursive form in which they are organized provides them with this quality by definition. Therefore, the one interested in the manner how information of a historical nature reverberates directly in the human consciousness has only one thing left to do: to read the accounts or speeches of the witnesses or to enjoy the privilege of hearing their didactic melody by listening to them. If the interest of a technical nature is added to that interest, if he aims to find out the deep rhetorical mechanisms that will have aroused his curiosity to study them, then, armed with a clear magnifying glass, he leans over them and tries to dissect them, as a doctor, at the risk of withering, for the moment, their beauty, but with the aim of understanding their essence.

Driven by such curiosity, I found it useful to turn my attention to one of the “*speeches that changed the world*”, according to a contemporary historian (Montefiore 2010), namely the one given by Elie Wiesel¹ on April 12, 1999, within a succession of conferences occasioned by the entry into the third millennium and organized at the White House. There were two reasons that led me to focus on the analysis of the argumentative strategies used by the mentioned orator in the effort to transfer his own convictions to the audience: the classification by the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore of that speech in the category of those with an overwhelming influence on the collective mind and the fact that the speaker is the same person as the actor of the evoked events.

As a former prisoner (in the years 1944-1945) of the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald camps and later, as an active militant constantly concerned with humanitarian issues (for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986), he was invited by the Clinton family to talk about the significance of that experience. The (didactic) reason for giving the speech is revealed by the American president’s wife, who takes care to emphasize the orator’s creed and competence².

3. In the vibrant speech held on that occasion, Elie Wiesel proceeds to an authentic anatomy, indeed, to a true indictment of man’s indifference to the suffering of his neighbor. The theme of the speech, the concrete means of approaching it, the fundamental message transmitted through the speech

¹ Politician, but also teacher and writer with outstanding public activity (president of the Holocaust Memorial Council).

² On that occasion, Hillary Clinton significantly declared: “*You taught us never to forget. You have shown us why we must always listen to the victims of indifference, hatred and evil*” (Montefiore 2010, 257)

as well as the argumentative strategies by which the speaker will be electrified then the audience are as many reasons that give the verbal concert an aura of generality, enrolling it among those that remain (or should remain) in the tradition of soul-stirring, decision-making oratory.

To any genuine orator, Elie Wiesel appears to be familiar with the fundamental principles of oratory. The binary and balanced thematic structure of the speech, the juxtaposition of the two themes, *the indifference of people towards the suffering of their fellow men* and *the hope* for a future in which that attitude will no longer find its place show a solid argumentative construction: the orator knows the principle summarized clearly by modern researchers, according to which “*any persuasion process starts with a problem that needs to be solved, with an attitude that needs to be changed*” (Buluc 2020). The same balance illustrates the fact that the speaker aims to gain the listeners’ adhesion, to inculcate in their minds his own creed, and the fact that the speech was delivered in the institutional heart of the United States, before an audience that included decision-makers (the President of the United States, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, members of Congress) confirm that he set out not only to impress but, above all, to cause decisions to be made. What attracts attention from the very beginning is the unitary circular character of the plea, both from the thematic point of view and from the audience’s reporting point of view; by this we understand the fact that the theme of the speech is recurrent, not being mentioned only at the beginning, in the first lines (in the *partitio* section), but returning almost obsessively throughout its length. Also, the dialogue with the public is permanent, maintained by questions and punctual interpellations: “*Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart... Why didn’t he allow these refugees to disembark?... What happened? Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?... Why did some of America’s largest corporations continue to do business with Hitler’s Germany until 1942?*” (Montefiore 2010, 205)

On the other hand, the same recurring rhetorical questions sprinkled throughout the article place Elie Wiesel in a timeless context, before a second, less concrete audience, before a court to which only high spirits and transfigured by suffering dare to address him (even in a rhetorical *altercation*): history, the deep springs of destiny: „*What is indifference?... What are its courses and inescapable consequences? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practise it...? Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?*” (Montefiore 2010, 203-205). The rhetorical questions fit the speech we are referring to in the same category as the famous funeral speech of Pericles to his fellow Greeks, from the year 430 BC, with the same quality: that of addressing contemporaries in concrete terms, but also abstract – to all Greekness, the Hellenic spirit, history.

4. *The strategies* put into play are multiple and oriented in particular directions, being elaborated in relation to the fundamental elements of an essentially inciting act of communication: if the sender is present with discretion, if brief references are made

to the entire contextual framework (the time and place of the speech), the receiver (in its double pose, as we will see) is the foreground instance of the discursive approach.

The indisputable *credibility* of the speaker is supported *ipso facto* by his quality as a former prisoner in the aforementioned concentration camps, a fact mentioned twice, directly and indirectly: “*Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian mountains woke up ...in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald*” (Montefiore 2010, 203); “*over there, behind the black gates of Auschwitz, the most tragic of all prisoners were the Muselmänner, as they were called*” (Montefiore 2010, 204). The concrete, almost infinitesimal details brought before the eyes of the audience (direct participant or listener) open the black doors evoked to a trembling reality that only a former prisoner could dare to revive. The persuasiveness of the lines is given by the cinematic aspect of the illustrated images, but especially the precise x-ray of the prisoners’ consciousness, the knowledge and revelation of their most intimate feelings give the passage a compelling persuasive nature: “*Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lay on the ground, staring vacantly into space, unaware of who or where they were - strangers to their surroundings. They no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing. They were dead and did know it*” (ibid.).

5. Having different dimensions, in direct and justified relation to the strategies pursued, the sections of the speech reflect the classic skeleton of an ancient plea: *the exordium* is deliberately performed *ex abrupto*: the moment and the context would not have allowed *insinuating* or *lavish* convolutions, so that *captatio benevolentiae* is achieved by directly introducing the listeners into the gray atmosphere of the camp; the corresponding shock is all the more intense as the move from a wondrous world to the pit of cruel suffering of the Elie Wiesel child is unexpectedly realized. It should be noted that the speaker chose to speak about himself in the third person, an elegant method of objective detachment in which he chooses not to place himself in the foreground, but to hide modestly behind the quasi-anonymity suggested by the functions of the respective people. The underlying antithesis expressively supports the idea through the presence of strongly affective words from the semantic field of extreme internal experiences: “*Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian mountains woke up, not far from Goethe’s beloved Weimar, in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald. He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart. He thought there never would be again.*” (Montefiore 2010, 203)

The cinematographic character of the story also emerges from the change of the two plans, of the evoked realities and the present. This *discursive strategy* of permanent oscillation is recurrent and is meant to hold the audience’s attention by arousing curiosity, by constantly cultivating a sense of expectation; how exactly? Each time the two situations of the escape in the past (the description of the

moment of liberation or the conditions in the camp)³ are followed by the taking of positions, sometimes sharp, sometimes detached, but always with a sententious air of the orator⁴.

6. The thematic content of the speech unfolds on two levels: the two succinct evocations (*narratio*) and the argumentative strategy (*confirmatio, probatio*). From the first reading (or from the first hearing) the obvious character of a particular strategy emerges: it is thus observed that the entire discursive fabric is put at the service of the fundamental theme, the condemnation of indifference, the plea for its permanent presence in people's consciousness and for consistent involvement: all the rhetorical questions that constitute a real *leitmotif* of the composition, well and balanced placed along the speech create a real tension that denotes the intensity of the speaker's feelings. In this way, the Aristotelian *ethical* component of the argumentative strategy is masterfully constructed: just like a spectator, the reader witnesses the speaker's revolt against the traumatic childhood experience, but not its virulent manifestations, but its controlled presence, as it is sweetened by the passage of time and of the art of oratory; at the same time, however, he cannot help but notice how it struggles every time he stands up in the court asking rhetorically what the meaning of the attitude is that he considers the basic reason for everything that happened: the indifference of people, maybe also of destiny, of history. Moreover, in the last instance *the ordering principle of the entire argumentative scheme* is the feeling of *restrained revolt*, not explicitly manifested, not trivially externalized, but distilled, transfigured, wisely dosed, an obvious fact also at the lexical level. Moreover, the whole argumentative strategy is coherently generated by this principle; it has a ternary structure and it is made up of the following types of major arguments:

a) *argumentum auctoritatis*, in which the emphasis is on the person of the speaker: he is the fundamental authority of the discourse. His polymorphism is confirmed in terms of vocabulary, each time in an expressive way: he is the one who believes⁵, affirms, supports with objective arguments⁶, takes a stance⁷, and the particular ways of realizing these determine the auditor to appropriate his point of view and to react at least in its inner forum, leaving history to confirm or deny whether that attitude will have manifested itself externally. *The argumentative force* is generated in this context not only by the multiplicity of instances of the speaker, but also by the fact that his interrogative voice emerges from every paragraph of the speech.

b) *argumentum ad populum*, to which Elie Wiesel resorts to attract his audience's adherence and cooperation. Even if in essence his speech

³ "Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian mountains woke up..."; "... Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lay on the ground..." (Montefiore 2010, 204)

⁴ "We are on the threshold of a new century, a new millennium. What will the legacy of this vanishing century be?"; "... Man can live far from God, but not outside God" (ibid., 203)

⁵ "He thought there never would be again" (Montefiore 2010, 257), "...some of us felt that to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him" (Montefiore 2010, 204).

⁶ "And now we knew, we learned, we discovered that the Pentagon knew, the State Department knew" (Montefiore 2010, 205).

⁷ "Surely it will be judged, and judged severely, in both moral and metaphysical terms" (Montefiore 2010, 203); "...indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it" (Montefiore 2010, 204); "...this time, the world was no longer silent. This time we do respond. This time, we intervene." (Montefiore 2010, 206)

falls into the category of *epideictic ones*, through the rich attitudinal range he also advertises himself from the category of *deliberative ones*. The discursive logic that supports these assertions is doubled by the use of linguistic tools (semantic and grammatical): verbs in the perfect tense move from the future to the present the decisions for which the speaker pleads for their usefulness, so that they appear as if they have already been taken, and the persuasive approach already crowned with success: “...good things have also happened in this traumatic century...” (Montefiore 2010, 206); “*This time, the world was no longer silent. This time we do respond. This time we intervene*” (ibid.). The use of the same verbs in the first person plural number have two functions: on the one hand, it denotes the involvement, the total participation of the sender in the respective decisions and actions (he addresses the audience from the same plane, he assumes the first task to be performed), on the other hand it constitutes yet another confirmation (if it was still needed) of the consistent use of ethical arguments, so necessary to convince the public; in their absence, any argumentative approach in an apparatus speech would sound exactly like the instrument that the Holy Apostle Paul is thinking about in his most emotional epistle⁸.

⁸If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (Epistle I to the Corinthians, 13, 1).

c) *argumentum ad misericordiam* consists of the attempt to evoke the atmosphere in the camp and the condition of the prisoners, by means of concrete lexical tools: qualifying or ornamental epithets (“*place of eternal infamy*”, “*behind the black gates of Auschwitz*”), metaphors (“*they were dead, but they didn’t know it*”), the accumulations in the ascending climax (“*they no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing*”) add expressiveness and an extra drama to the simple descriptions that through them themselves impress the audience (“*wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lay on the ground, staring into space...*”). Also, the same pity-triggering effect is generated by the image of *the child* at the beginning and end of the speech; the change in the number of the respective noun is not accidental at all: if at the beginning the attention is drawn to the boy Wiesel “*from a small town in the Carpathian mountains*”, in the end the invocation of the masses of children places him, by generalization, in a universal perspective: the destiny of the Wiesel child is in fact the fate of all children in times of war. Again the orator turns to rhetorical questions (“*What about the children?...Do we hear their pleas? Do we feel their pain, their agony?*”) in the unanswered dialogue with the reason of history; together with the sententious tone (“*when adults wage wars, children perish*”) they are intended to give the end of the speech a messianic tone, in full agreement with the social context that occasioned the delivery of the speech.

We believe that to the strategies or types of classic arguments, what could be called *argumentum ad historiam*, used repeatedly by the orator, should be added; its recurrence in universal literature can claim and justify at the same

time a place in the citadel; its purpose would be to allow the orator to invoke history, to demand, in the subtext, the judgment of past evils and to propose the correction, through the underlying didactic act, of man.

7. The strategy of omitting the section devoted to the rejection of the opponent's arguments (real or possible), specific to a classic speech, is not random at all, but on the contrary, well thought out. Engaging in a rhetorical dialogue with history, Elie Wiesel formulates the questions in a way that leaves no room for any answer, as it emerges by itself: "*Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue?... What are its courses and inescapable consequences?*" (Montefiore 2010, 203).

In the last section of the speech we witness a succinct *digresio* in which the speaker invites the audience to a meditation on the fate of children⁹; thus, in order to give it even more dramatic dimensions, objective arguments from the category of statistically verifiable evidence¹⁰ are brought in in an equally succinct *conquestio*; always attentive to the principles of classical rhetoric but without deviating from the discretion and refinement of their application, the orator expresses his creed in an apothetic *conclusio*; its two qualities, succinctness and perfect lexical and semantic balance ("*...we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and an extraordinary hope*", (Montefiore 2010, 206) make it all the more vibrant.

8. Like any argumentative discursive architecture, Elie Wiesel's speech also contains two usually inseparable components: *the explanatory* and *the seductive one*. The concrete procedures for their realization are varied and balanced: the logical substantiation of the ideas, the realism of the descriptions (brief, admittedly, but extremely percussive due to their suggestive force) contribute to the outline of the first one, the coherent subordination of the ideas and the examples that support them on the general theme stated, its treatment from several perspectives, its repetitive character. Knowing the principle according to which "*argument dynamites social inertia*" (Roventă-Frumușani 2000, 176) the speaker uses varied, logical arguments (ordered according to the most effective strategy recommended by the most knowledgeable sources (Olbrechts-Tyteca and Perelman 1968, 522), namely *the Nestorian one*), quasi-logical (of which the dominant one is the one based on reciprocity, in the form of a parallelism developed on a double plane: the consequences of human indifference on the Wiesel child and on contemporary children); *the arguments based on the structure of reality* enjoy the same treatment: the pragmatic ones (the treatment of people in Nazi camps and the joint decision of the United States and NATO to get involved in the Kosovo conflict; both are referred to at the end of the speech) and *the waste argument* (remembering the decision to joint involvement in saving the children of Kosovo, doubled by the expression

⁹ "*What about the children? Oh, ... their fate is always the most tragic, inevitably*" (Montefiore 2010, 206)

¹⁰ "*Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, hunger*" (Montefiore 2010, 206)

¹¹After recalling the military intervention in Kosovo to save the refugees, Wiesel asks, optimistic and to a great extent convinced of the change for the better in mankind: „*Has the human being become less indifferent and more human?*” (Montefiore 2010, 206).

of hope¹¹). The second component is defined by the particular attention given to the *elocutio* aspect (more specifically the use of the stylistic figures of which we mentioned: metaphor, epithet, ascending climax, repetition, rhetorical questions) and by the use of ethical and affective arguments (exemplified *above*). Both components (present in a subordinate relationship, the explanatory one - the seductive one) prepare to achieve the same result: persuading the auditor and obtaining his adherence to the speaker's opinions and proposal.

9. Perhaps the most relevant (and at the same time more productive) argumentative strategy that Elie Wiesel appeals to is rhetorical questioning. The previously stated as well as its recurring character indicate the orator's preference for this effective, through the multiple springs it triggers, way of persuasion. Among the four ways of achieving communion with the audience, together with *the cultural allusion, the quotation and the apostrophe* (Roventă-Frumușani 2000, 43), his questions reflect various states of mind: the scrutinizing reflection in order to understand the connotations of the pivotal concept of the discourse (“*What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means “no difference”*”), philosophical-ontological meditation (“*Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable?*”), concern (“*What will the legacy of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium?*”), aporia (“*God is wherever we are. Even in suffering? Even in suffering?*”), diffuse but grounded hope (“*Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed?*”) (Montefiore 2010, 206). The argumentative and dialectical valences of rhetorical questioning have two sources: their relevance, generality, and depth, and the dual nature of the addressee (the sender himself and, as we have seen, history). Their number betrays the orator's soul turmoil but also his concern to understand the deep mechanisms of destiny, and the two aspects shine through from the very first words, an aspect that particularly sensitizes the audience.

Another quality of the speech consists in the cardinal feelings it conveys, which in fact constitute its fundamental skeleton: the shock of freedom, with which man does not know for what purpose to use it; loneliness in suffering, compassion, deep concern, ardent faith, fear, restrained but consistent hope. The detached, weighted tone, restrained with oratorical mastery, is also impressive; Wiesel does not allow himself to be dominated by dehumanizing feelings: although the memory of the suffering in the camp shines through in the interrogative attitude, in the vivid realism of some of the words used in the short descriptions, in the drive, finally mastered, to launch into an indictment of history, the orator does not turn into an ephemeral judge of the Nazis, but prefers a rhetorical dialogue with history, with destiny. He addresses the listening public, but also the eternal reader, the posterity in which he puts his hope that it will no longer be affected by the disease of indifference, which he considers the cause of all the suffering in the camp.

10. Having a descriptive aspect “*through valorization*” (Roventă-Frumușani 2000, 27) and injunctive “*through the persuasion component*” (ibid.), effectively exploiting three of the four¹² principles of achieving persuasion, as formulated by modern researchers (Buluc 2020, 79) Elie Wiesel’s plea can be considered a model of epideictic speech. The engaging attitude of the orator, his constant concern to evoke deep feelings in the audience (evident in the use of a wide palette of strategies, as I have tried to illustrate), the authorial detachment are qualities that support the paradigmatic aspect of the speech and highlight its quality as to constitute, beyond a historical document, also a fertile material for the study of the mechanisms of persuasion; deliberately ignoring the first, in the present research I have focused strictly on the second and highlighted with examples what it manages to convey in a technical and expressive manner.

Anchored in a precise moment in history, the speech, however, goes beyond the frames of the ephemerality through its topicality. Its echoes should ring in the consciousness of the empowered and cause them to act so that it will answer its original function. Otherwise, a new Wiesel will be able to make similar pleas in years to come, other viewers will be impressed, other scholars will lean on them, using them as lecture materials, but letting, through their own indifference, history repeat itself, once again implacably and proving that they will have understood nothing of a once vibrant message.

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¹² a) Establishing credibility; b) Presenting and framing the purpose of persuasion so as to include the common ground with the listeners; c) Strengthening the position, the change, the modification, the purpose of the persuasion using the most plastic language and clear evidence; d) Emotional connection with the audience”.