

GHOSTWRITING AND THE RHETORICAL CRITIC

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THE rhetorical critic has always been faced with the problems posed by the ghostwriter, but in the last thirty years the practice of specters composing has spread so rapidly that the critic of contemporary public address finds a ghost lurking somewhere in almost any research project he undertakes.

There are several reasons for the increase in ghostwriting. The practice finds a hospitable environment in our contemporary culture with its specialization and its growing corporate character. Bureaucracy breeds ghostwriting. The bureaucratic organization is essentially one of specialization, delegated authority, and committees. The leader has many demands on his time. Details are delegated to experts, and speech writing tends to become another delegated detail.

Concomitant with this specialization of function and delegation of authority, is the growth of the committee. The candidate speaks for the party, the president speaks for the corporation, the Secretary of State speaks for the State Department, but what he says is carefully determined within the organizational bureaucracy—usually in committee. The speaker does not speak for himself but for the corporation or bureaucracy.

This phenomenon can be traced through the executive departments of the Federal Government to the President himself. Since Franklin D. Roose-

velt, the ghostwriting team has been an integral part of the White House Staff. The practice has now moved downward into the executive mansions of many of our states, and political candidates for state and national office have picked up the procedure. Professor Windes has given us a detailed account of this practice in his "Adlai E. Stevenson's Speech Staff in the 1956 Campaign" (*QJS*, February 1960). Many college presidents, leaders of industry and labor, also use the ghostwriting team.

The second reason for the growth of ghostwriting has been the development of the mass media. The major speech that will be reported throughout the state or nation, or, perhaps, throughout the world, needs careful preparation. Each word must be weighed and the viewpoints pooled when a speech is prepared. The organization is full of experts who expect to be, and usually are consulted when important statements are being drafted.

In contemporary history only a few statesmen, such as Churchill, Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt, have had enough faith in their rhetorical skill to withstand, for the most part, the pressure of using ghostwriters. Indeed, so common is the practice today, that the first question a critic of contemporary public address ought to ask himself when he contemplates a research project is the same question the cynical contemporary audience probably asked when they heard the speech, namely, "I wonder who wrote that for him?" For the rhetorical critic this question is not an

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expression of idle curiosity but an important criterion for evaluating the difficulty and worth of his project. In very practical fashion the question of who wrote the speech affects the development of any rhetorical criticism.

The critic must deal with all or part of the following materials: the ideas of the speaker as revealed in the speeches to be criticized, the organization of those ideas, the speaker's delivery of the speeches, and the style in which the ideas were expressed. Perhaps the structure of the speeches can be criticized without considering the influence of the ghost, but biographical details are usually necessary for making an analysis of a speaker's ideas, delivery, and style. The speaker's education, speech training, reading, the influence of parents, teachers, and colleagues—all of these aspects are often considered to give insight into or explain the speaker's rhetorical practices. The delivery of the speech is influenced by the speaker's preparation and it is within the analysis of speech preparation that the most careful research is required when ghostwriters are discovered.

The importance and complexity of the enterprise is illustrated by the analysis of Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech preparation, in Brandenburg and Braden's monograph in the third volume of *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*.¹ In the same volume Richard Murphy examined Theodore Roosevelt's speech preparation in 1,900 words, about one-eighth of his paper.² Because Theodore Roosevelt wrote his own speeches Murphy could concentrate

on the way one man prepared speeches. Brandenburg and Braden's analysis required 6,000 words, a little more than one-fourth of their longer monograph. Their impressively detailed analysis indicates that various people contributed phrases, ideas, drafts of speeches, and that the procedure frequently varied from speech to speech so that the preparation of each speech posed a new research problem. This raised a host of questions of this order: Was the "quarantine" expression in Roosevelt's address of October 5, 1937 actually Roosevelt's, or Rosenman's, or Ickes'? Did Raymond Moley, Robert Sherwood, Judge Rosenman, or Charles Michelson prepare the first draft of Roosevelt's fireside chat, March 12, 1933? Who thought up the phrase, "Martin, Barton, and Fish"?

Indeed, the Brandenburg and Braden monograph indicates that when a ghost or a committee of ghosts is present, the preparation of the speech affects not only the delivery but the ideas within the speech and, most importantly, the style of the speech. Style is the most personal aspect of speechmaking. It is in this area that the ghost's influence is most destructive and subtle. Marie Hochmuth, in her introductory essay for the third volume of *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, wrote, "If style is the man himself, then a close scrutiny of the details of style should tell us what manner of man is doing the speaking, and in what relationship he conceives himself to be with his audience."³ Claude M. Feuss makes the same point in discussing presidential ghostwriters. A presidential statement, he writes, should "reveal the au-

¹ Earnest Brandenburg and Waldo Braden, "Franklin Delano Roosevelt," *History and Criticism of American Public Address*, III, ed. Marie Hochmuth (New York, 1955), 458-530.

² Richard Murphy, "Theodore Roosevelt," *ibid.*, pp. 313-364.

³ Marie Hochmuth, "The Criticism of Rhetoric," *ibid.*, p. 21.

thor's true self, that indefinable quality which makes his words glow and shine."⁴

The ghostwriter understands the importance of using a style that is appropriate to the speaker. He makes every effort to adapt his language to the personality of his client. Judge Rosenman maintained that the presidential ghostwriters "came gradually and unconsciously to be able to imitate the President's style—some, of course, better than others."⁵ Despite the best intentions, the ghost skillful enough to hide his own personality when he writes a speech, is rare indeed. Larston Farrar points out this difficulty by telling of a game that the insiders used to play in Washington, D. C.:

They would take the *Congressional Record*, read the speeches by the many legislators, and mark down the names of the ghost-writers whom they could recognize merely by the verbiage employed. They could find, for instance, merely by tracing certain literary giveaways, apparent in every writer's work, that one writer would be ghosting speeches for as many as five or six different legislators.⁶

Pity the rhetorical critic who follows Miss Hochmuth's dictum and tries to "tell what manner of man is doing the speaking" by analyzing the style of these particular speeches. Robert Ray, from his experience of criticizing the committee-written speeches of Franklin Roosevelt and Thomas Dewey in the campaign of 1944, concluded that the manner of the ghosts must be known, too:

The critic of contemporary presidential campaign speeches has the responsibility to investigate thoroughly the matter of authorship. In addition to the established canons of criticism it is incumbent upon the critic that he know the character of those who assist in

⁴ Claude M. Feuss, "Ghosts in the White House," *American Heritage*, X (December 1958), 99.

⁵ Samuel I. Rosenman, *Working with Roosevelt* (New York, 1952), p. 233.

⁶ Larston D. Farrar, "Live Ghosts in Washington," *American Mercury*, LXXXIII (November 1956), 112.

speech preparation and, to the extent possible, the degree of their influence in the speech-making process.⁷

Not only is the problem of authorship central to the speech texts themselves, but insofar as the rhetorical critic utilizes the historical method, the ghostwriter poses a broader problem. Today it is common for ghosts to write memoirs, autobiographies, magazine articles, and even letters. If the critic is not careful he will be misled by ghostwriters in many aspects of his research. Ernest R. May makes the point a bit acidly in his article, "Ghostwriting and History," when he writes:

In 1950, the Supreme Court ruled against the admissibility of ghost-written speeches and documents, describing ghost writing as "the custom of putting up decoy authors to impress the guileless." On evidence that courts reject, historians have to depend in their search for truth.⁸

To explain how the growing practice of ghostwriting not only makes rhetorical criticism more difficult, but how it may actually destroy criticism, it is necessary to examine the rationale for rhetorical criticism. There are essentially two schools of thought. The most influential viewpoint has been that a speech, to be adequately evaluated, must be viewed as an interaction of the speaker with his environment. This might be called the speaker-oriented rhetorical criticism, for the critic attempting to investigate a speech along these lines must have a thorough understanding of the man who wrote the speech in order to criticize the speech. To such a critic, textual authenticity is vital. Baird and Thonssen, who have developed this approach in their book, *Speech Criticism*, devote a chapter to

⁷ Robert Ray, "Ghostwriting in Presidential Campaigns," *Today's Speech*, IV (September 1956), 15.

⁸ Ernest R. May, "Ghostwriting and History," *The American Scholar*, XXII (1953), 463.

the problems of textual authenticity. If the critic is going to emphasize the role of the speaker in the development of the speech, then it is crucial that he have the right man. This problem is illustrated by Richard Baker's study of the persuasive techniques of Benjamin F. Fairless. Baker discovered that from 1946 to 1950 Fairless's language was "poor," but in April, 1950, there was a "startling" improvement. Fairless became conversational and his language was simple, familiar, and easy to understand. It was in April, 1950, that Phelps Adams joined United States Steel's public relations firm and started assisting with Mr. Fairless's speeches.⁹ If the ghost has contributed as substantially as Phelps Adams did in the drafting of a speech, it may, indeed, be that his speech training, education, hobbies, and reading habits should be examined as well as Mr. Fairless's. When an entire committee has written the speech, the problem of relevant biographical materials becomes so complex as to be almost impossible.

The second approach is that of the speech-oriented criticism. McBurney and Wrage represent this viewpoint in their book, *The Art of Good Speech*. They suggest that the artistic theory be used in speech criticism. This involves criticizing the speech by "the principles of the art."¹⁰ On the surface, it would seem that concentrating on the artistry with which a given speech has been developed, might solve the critical problems posed by the ghostwritten speech. If the critic restricted his criticism to the speech, without examining biographical details of the men who wrote the speeches, then authorship would be relatively unimportant. If the King of England wanted a speech to explain to his people the

reasons for his abdicating the throne and he could get Winston Churchill to help write the speech, then Edward's speech could be studied and criticized as good rhetoric even though he did not write it himself.

However, a criticism of the speeches of a junior Senator from a midwestern state on the soil bank, would be difficult to justify on artistic grounds. For that matter, it would be difficult to justify the criticism of the major speeches of the last two Presidents on such grounds. In short, the ghostwriter makes the artistic criticism of speeches difficult if not impossible, because there is very little that is artistically worth studying in his efforts. The reason for this is that the ghost, writing for someone else, tends not to write as well as he can. The ghost has a tendency to be discreet and careful. He weakens adjectives and tones down the strength of statements. He knows the punishment for a misstatement or a careless word. He weighs and ponders every expression, and as a result, he dilutes the distinctiveness and strength and spontaneity of whatever writing talent he may have.

In addition, few really important speeches are now the work of one personality. The trend is for a panel of ghosts to work in committee fashion. After members of the panel have discussed the goals and major ideas for the speech, they gather material, prepare a draft, and submit the draft to the committee for further discussion and a series of revisions. When the draft reaches a degree of perfection it is submitted to further screenings. A speech by a political figure may be looked over by someone representing the farm vote, by someone from labor, by a representative from the urban areas, and by someone with an eye for various religious and minority groups. After the rough edges that

⁹ *SM*, XXVI (1959), 100.

¹⁰ James H. McBurney and Ernest J. Wrage, *The Art of Good Speech* (New York, 1953), pp. 22-23.

might irritate any political pressure group have been sanded smooth, the committee polishes the document and the chairman reads it as his own.

What emerges from this process, no matter how talented the individual writers are, is a sort of grammatically correct, innocuous prose, not well suited for artistic criticism. Robert Sherwood, no stranger to the speech-writing committee, made this point in discussing a speech of Harry Hopkins:

It was too carefully prepared, too meticulously conciliatory to all groups, to be a characteristic expression of Hopkins himself. It was the kind of speech which appeared to have been written by a large committee rather than by the individual speaker; it was synthetic, characterless.¹¹

Like the slick six-author movies of a few years ago, a committee writes a speech that tends to be slick, commercial, and lacking in individuality.

¹¹ Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (New York, 1949), p. 111.

Style may be the man, but when that style is five men, it ceases to be any style at all. Since current ghostwriting practices militate against producing an effective speech, or an artistic one, they undercut the rhetorical critic no matter what his standards of criticism may be.

Under the impetus of the ghostwriter, American public address moves more and more in the direction of the rhetoric of the second Sophistic. It becomes a ritual, or an exhibition, produced at the expected time. As the public becomes more and more cynical about the authorship of speeches, the ethos of the speaker is undermined; the speech loses its hold upon the public as a vital factor in public affairs. The level of rhetoric declines and its function as a fundamental tool for the winnowing of ideas in a democratic society is lost. With this decline, the justification for rhetorical criticism declines as well.