Rhetoric

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B. H. Roberts before 1895. About the time this photograph was taken, Roberts published his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History.* He was also serving as a member of the First Council of the Seventy. Courtesy Richard Roberts.

Rhetoric

Gary Layne Hatch

Rhetoric is a term that for many readers has a negative meaning: language used to deceive or confuse, language that sounds good but has no real substance. In B. H. Roberts's time and earlier, however, rhetoric had a much broader meaning: skill in speaking or writing to a public audience in order to affect the views or behavior of that audience. In keeping with this broader meaning of rhetoric, this essay examines how Roberts used language to move his audience to accept the truth of scientific knowledge and divine revelation, to follow the way of the gospel, and to live a Christian life.

Audience

The first concern of the student of rhetoric is to identify and understand an author's audience. In the introductory chapter in Draft 2, Roberts contemplated several target audiences, including students, independent philosophers, and priesthood quorums. In his third and final draft he continues to address these multiple audiences. Roberts sometimes had a young student audience in mind. For example, he provides an "analysis" or summary of each chapter along with a rather ambitious list of readings. He provides page numbers and chapter references for these readings, but he often recommends an entire book or any "standard work" on the subject (29). In addition, some lesson outlines contain instructions to teachers and students. For instance, in the lesson outline for chapter 2, Roberts instructs the teacher to assign the scripture reading lesson "a week in advance of the lesson treatment that a selection suitable to the theme of the lesson may be obtained, and the reading practiced" (29). He then recommends Ezekiel 18 as a reading suitable for that chapter. In the lesson outline for chapter 3, Roberts gives some words of caution to the students: "All the works given in the column of 'References' should be read with discrimination; not accepting either all the premises laid down, or the conclusions reached. They are given merely as sources through which the

student may pursue his thought-investigations, not for unquestioning acceptance" (37).

Other characteristics found throughout the text confirm that he also had in mind a much broader audience than members of the Church. In fact, Roberts seems to be using the publishing opportunity provided by the Church to write the book he really wanted to write: a synthesis of all his thinking on theology for a general audience. He states at one point that his theories about human origins will be "not only a service to our own church, especially to the youth of it, but a service to all Christendom, and to humanity in general" (318). He appears to distinguish between "students" of his book and "readers." Most of the time he refers to his audience as "the reader." But he occasionally refers to the "general reader," "readers and the students of this book," "the reader or student," or even the "reader-student." Usually, the term "reader" is general and unspecified. The fact that Roberts occasionally distinguishes between readers and students, however, may indicate that he has at least two separate audiences in mind.

The background information Roberts provides and the stance he sometimes takes toward his topic show that he considered the needs of these readers and others who were not Latter-day Saints. When referring to LDS writings, Roberts occasionally provides more background information than one would expect to be necessary for the LDS reader. For example, Roberts explains what "the Church of the Latter-day Saints say in their summary of faith" (412) as he proceeds to quote the second Article of Faith, familiar to all within the Church. In chapter 42, Roberts felt the need to explain by an insertion that the book of Mosiah was found in the Book of Mormon (414, n.1). He either assumed that his audience was not LDS or was not well versed in LDS scripture. On another occasion, he prefaces a quotation from the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob in this manner: "A book was published in 1830 purporting to be the revealment of an inspired scripture abridged from larger authoritative writings had among the ancient peoples of America, in which one of their inspired teachers is represented as saying . . ." (21). Likewise, with respect to a revelation contained in the Pearl of Great Price, Roberts reports that "Moses is represented" (99) as talking with God face to face. On another occasion, Roberts refers to the Doctrine and Covenants in a similarly detached manner. In chapter 1, after surveying a number of definitions of truth given by philosophers, Roberts cites the definition of truth given in Doctrine and Covenants 93:24 and mentions that this book "claimed for itself a divine authority" (21). He then distances himself somewhat from this claim and writes, "If this [definition of truth] is spoken with divine

sanction, under inspiration from God . . ." (22). His use of the word *if* and his assertion that the Doctrine and Covenants *claimed* authority are odd if Roberts is writing only to an LDS audience; these statements make sense, however, if Roberts is trying to reach a more general audience. By adopting this detached manner, Roberts strives to give the impression that he is approaching his own faith objectively and that he does not take for granted that his audience will share his knowledge and beliefs. Such a gesture establishes common ground for his rational appeal to the members of the audience, inviting them to identify with his beliefs. Furthermore, Roberts states at one point that his remarks on human origins are directed "only to those people who have supposedly built their faiths upon the revelations of God found in the Old and in the New Testament" (207).

At one point, Roberts even distanced himself from his belief in the Bible. He spoke of "the alleged Hebrew revelation" (153) and said that the Old Testament "is alleged to have been written under the inspiration of God" (156). In discussing the relationship between humans and animals, he wrote: "It is represented in some ~~alleged~~ revelations that when God had created man he gave him dominion over all the earth, with a commandment to subdue it, and have dominion over all that was upon it" (73). The fact that he originally wrote "alleged" suggests his desire to establish his objectivity and identify with a broader audience. He may have crossed the word out when he realized, perhaps, that distancing himself from the Bible in this manner was unnecessary or offensive to a general Christian audience.

Roberts directly addresses a non-LDS audience in his appendix to chapter 55, in which he discusses the history of LDS plural marriage. As a Latter-day Saint and a former polygamist himself, Roberts realized that he would have some difficulty writing to a general audience on the subject of marriage. In order to build common ground and credibility with his audience, therefore, he tries to establish his objectivity. After describing the history of plural marriage in the Church, he writes, "It is to be understood, of course, that the foregoing statements are but an academic setting forth of the plural marriage feature of the marriage system of the Church of the New Dispensation, and are not intended as propaganda of that feature" (559).

Use of Generalities

In addition to audience, the student of rhetoric is concerned with *style*—the patterns and forms of language. Roberts writes in a variety of styles, from the plain and straightforward (in his textbook-like descriptions of scientific knowledge) to the highly ornamental and descriptive

(in his eloquent presentations of lofty concepts). These ornamental passages may sound somewhat exaggerated to the contemporary reader, but they reflect the rhetoric of Roberts's time very well.

Richard Weaver, a younger contemporary of Roberts, has described the characteristics of what he called the "old rhetoric"—a style that was passing out of fashion about the time Roberts wrote *The Truth, The Way, The Life* but would have appealed to many of Roberts's readers. One characteristic of this style was the abundant use of generalities whose validity is based upon the assumption that the audience and author had in common a relevant body of knowledge and experience.[1] A tendency to this type of generality appears in Roberts's description in chapter 2 of "what man knows" (29). The entire chapter is worth examining from a rhetorical perspective, but the sections on "Consciousness of self and other selfs" and "Knowledge of external things" provide sufficient examples, for instance:

> Man knows himself as existing. He is a self-conscious entity. He knows himself as existing by many manifestations. He knows himself as seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling; as feeling—meaning by that only the sense of touch. But most of all in these manifestations through which man attains self-consciousness, he knows himself as thinking: "I think, therefore I am." This of a long time now has been the most acceptable formula for expressing self-consciousness—assurance of self-existence. One thinks, and one acts: therefore one is. . . .
>
> He knows the earth is divided into islands and continents, seas and oceans, rivers and bays. He knows of the existence of the town or hamlet or countryside where he was born. In time he knows by visitation the capital of his county, of his state, of his country. He knows, at least by report, of the great centers of world population. He has verified so many things reported to him that he has confidence quite generally in what is reported to him, and seems supported by the consensus of opinion of others who have experienced them. (29–30)

Roberts continues expanding his list of "what man knows," but he provides very few concrete details, relying upon the reader to fill in the gaps with shared experience and knowledge. To contemporary readers, who demand that writing be vivid, concrete, and immediate, such generalizing appears irresponsible.

In addition to generalizations, Roberts uses what Weaver would call "uncontested terms," assertions without proof.[2] Some may object that Roberts does not truly make his case or that his thinking is superficial. Actually, as Weaver explains, the style Roberts employs does not require a defense or illustration of uncontested terms. Roberts's very point of departure is that self-evident truths—things that all humans know and experience—exist. Roberts does not prove these assertions

because they find their proof in the shared experience of humanity. Weaver calls this approach the author's "right of assumption," a "right to assume that precedents are valid, that forms will persist, and that in general one may build today on what was created yesterday."[3] This right carries with it the authority of the collective wisdom of humanity. Such a right, however, would not always be granted today and was losing popularity even during Roberts's time.

Roberts's style of arguing from generalities and common knowledge reflects one of the main organizing principles of *TWL.* Roberts attempts to find a foothold for faith in a time of increasing disbelief and disillusion. He illustrates his method by describing a set of circles fixed around a common point (40). That common point is those things that all humans know: common experience and shared knowledge. Roberts then moves from that common point to one circle and then to the next, demonstrating that disputes about religion and behavior can be resolved by reference to this common point: a true understanding of knowledge and religion creates a common basis for Christian action. Thus *TWL* is organized to lead readers from the knowledge they all share to a resolution of their differences.

Authoritative Voice

Because he is addressing a general audience and building upon common knowledge, Roberts speaks with an authoritative voice. Rhetorically, the writer's voice is important because a writer who does not speak in a manner appropriate for the audience and occasion will lose the confidence of that audience. Roberts addresses this problem of voice in his introduction:

> When we contemplate the largeness of the theme, the height and the depth of it, and recall how many world-geniuses have wrecked their thought upon it, we marvel at the audacity that dares to attempt so much! . . .
>
> If the author of this proposed treatise were depending upon his own learning, or on any way of wisdom in himself to justify the investigation of these high themes, then he would not only shrink from the task but would abandon it altogether, as being inadequate to such an undertaking. But the author believes himself to be living in what, in the parlance of his faith, is called the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times in which a great volume of truth has been revealed in addition to, but in harmony with, the truth revealed in former dispensations. In fact in this Dispensation of the Fullness of Times all truth of former dispensations and the whole volume of it, is being merged into a unity. The veil of mystery is being rent to reveal the things of God in their completeness, and it is upon the basis of this more fully revealed

> knowledge that the author ventures to speak, rather than from any learning or intellectual excellence in himself. (16)

This passage shows how Roberts establishes a credible voice. He anticipates that some will accuse him of arrogance for attempting to speak in an authoritative manner on broad philosophical issues, so he demonstrates that his authority as a writer does not come from his own intelligence and learning. Rather, his authority derives from divine revelation and the collected wisdom of humanity. Having made this one self-effacing remark, he speaks with confidence through the rest of the work. This confidence reflects the old rhetorical style wherein the writer spoke "for corporate humanity" as "the mouthpiece for a collective brand of wisdom which was not to be delivered in individual accents."[4]

Adaptation of Style to Subject

Another feature of the old rhetoric is the occasional use of the grand or heroic style.[5] The ancient writers on rhetoric, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, acknowledged three levels of style: the grand, the middle, and the plain. Unlike many contemporary writers who believe that each person should cultivate an individual style, ancient authors chose a style to match the subject.[6] A lofty or elevated subject would require an equally lofty style. What the contemporary reader may view as inconsistency or unevenness in Roberts's writing, then, may actually be Roberts's attempts to adapt his style to the immediate subject at hand. Roberts generally writes in a middle style—the language of a scholar—appropriate to the serious but fairly commonplace nature of much of what he describes. At times, however, he makes an abrupt stylistic change and waxes poetic, in the grand style, using parallel and balanced phrases, elevated diction, and figures of speech. Consider the following passage from Roberts's description of truth in chapter 1:

> Truth is not a stagnant pool, but a living fountain; not a Dead Sea, without tides or currents. On the contrary it is an ocean, immeasurably great, vast, co-extensive with the universe itself. It is the universe bright-heaving, boundless, endless, and sublime! Moving in majestic currents, uplifted by cosmic tides in ceaseless ebb and flow, variant but orderly; taking on new forms from ever changing combinations, new adjustments, new relations—multiplying itself in ten thousand times ten thousand ways, ever reflecting the Intelligence of the Infinite, and declaring alike in its whispers and its thunders the hived wisdom of the ages! (24)

The first two sentences demonstrate the balance and parallelism in Roberts's grand style: the stagnant pool contrasted with the living

fountain, the Dead Sea contrasted with an ocean as boundless as the universe. The third sentence is a lengthy elaboration of the metaphorical comparison of truth with this ocean/universe. This sentence contains a number of poetic devices, including poetic diction, or the use of uncommon words or common words in an uncharacteristic manner. The universe of truth is "bright-heaving," has "cosmic tides," and moves in "majestic currents." Truth "whispers" and "thunders" the "hived wisdom" of humanity. Roberts mixes his metaphors—truth as universe, ocean, and beehive—but this fault may have gone unnoticed in his day. Such a style may be jarring to contemporary readers, but it would have been conventional to those accustomed to the old rhetoric.

Another passage illustrates Roberts's grand style. In this passage, Roberts describes the activity of those who seek after the truth: archaeologists, historians, geologists, and scientists. In order to capture the energy of this group, Roberts switches to a more poetic style:

> Others, still, are seeking truth by utilizing what, in general terms, we call natural forces, and applying them to industrial and commercial activities. To locomotion on land and sea; to the production of light and heat and mechanical power; thus increasing the supply of the world's necessities, conveniences, comforts, luxuries, and adding to its progress in material ways, until it would seem that millennium conditions dreamed of by saints, sang of by poets, and predicted by prophets, would not only be realized but surpass all the excellence of anticipation, even of inspired anticipation. (26)

Here again Roberts uses balance and parallelism to build phrase upon phrase, idea upon idea, to a climax. Specifically, he describes the millennial world "dreamed of by saints, sang of by poets, and predicted by prophets." Roberts also uses stylistic repetition. Instead of merely saying "the world's necessities," he adds "conveniences, comforts, [and] luxuries." Such repetition is logically redundant, but it is stylistically important to portray the wonder of technological progress.

Roberts concludes his description of truth seekers—archaeologists, historians, geologists, and scientists—with an *apostrophe,* a rhetorical technique of speaking to those who are absent as if they were present. Here Roberts speaks directly to these truth seekers as a body:

> Such is the great and varied host of seekers after truth, and as we contemplate them from the departing days of passing years, we shout to them with all our voice, and say, "success to you**!**" The world's best hope for all time is your continued progress! Seek on, and let each one bring to the service of man that which he shall find of the truth, confident that the world's progress, the advancement of civilization, man's best welfare, and God's greatest glory will be in exact proportion to your success. Legends, venerable for their age, you may destroy;

> myths, though beautiful, you may discredit; creeds, formulated on misconceptions of truth, may crumble at your touch; half truths, dear to some, you may rend from men's belief. With all these there may go much to which the world has become attached, and your work at times may seem iconoclastic; but in the end all will be well, nothing will perish but that which is false and evil. (27)

With its repetition of words and phrases, balance and parallelism, and poetic diction, this passage may appear overstated and exaggerated to the contemporary reader. Those familiar with the old rhetoric, however, would have recognized the style of this passage as elevation rather than exaggeration, a style wholly appropriate to the loftiness of the theme. The printed page does not do justice to the elevated rhythms of this passage. It must be read aloud.

Oral Qualities

As a mission president, missionary, President of the Seventy, and a politician, Roberts had many opportunities for public address, and he was renowned as an orator. Some of the oral qualities of Roberts's public speaking found their way into *TWL,* possibly because he dictated the book to his secretary. One wonders how many of the more oratorical and elevated passages of this work came to Roberts in the dynamic act of speaking the text aloud for his secretary to transcribe. Readers should try reading aloud the grand-style passages cited above—with emphasis—to realize the full stylistic effect of Roberts's writing.

One can imagine that Roberts also revised his dictation in the act of delivery, much as one would adapt a sermon or speech. Some of the errors Roberts makes indicate just such an adaptation: the errors are oral rather than written. In quoting lines of poetry (often without attribution) from William Shakespeare, Robert Browning, Walter Scott, and John Milton, for example, Roberts often changes words. These changes suggest that Roberts is relying on his memory. Roberts makes similar errors in quoting scripture, indicating perhaps that he recited passages from memory rather than from the scriptural text itself. Additional allusions and echoes to passages—the common stock of an experienced public speaker—were doubtless stored in Roberts's memory.

Conclusion

Richard Weaver writes about the old rhetoric as something that was passing out of fashion in the early part of the twentieth century. Indeed, few remnants exist of the oratorical tradition of which Roberts was a part. If some aspects of Roberts's writing and language seem

old-fashioned or inappropriate to the contemporary reader, the reason may be that the entire project of *TWL* goes against the assumptions of the contemporary world. Roberts adapts his language to his theme, a theme that Roberts and Weaver assumed to be common in the past, "that true knowledge somehow had its source in the mind of minds."[7] The goal of Roberts's rhetoric was to express this theme in an authoritative and fitting style.

NOTES

[1]Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, Calif.: Hermagoras, 1985), 167.
[2]Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric,* 166.
[3]Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric,* 169.
[4]Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric,* 182.
[5]Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric,* 166, 169.
[6]Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric,* 185.
[7]Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric,* 185.