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**Abstract:**

One of the most distinctive stylistic virtues of speechwriting is characterization, the art of capturing a client's voice in a believable and engaging manner. This article examines characterization in the context of corporate communication, interweaving an interview with veteran executive speechwriter Alan Perlman with accounts from the ancient rhetorical tradition. As the analysis shows, Perlman's approach to characterization confirms long-standing rhetorical wisdom yet incorporates insights that reflect the contemporary corporate context in which he has worked. The analysis also calls attention to enduring tensions in characterization—tensions between imitation and representation, effectiveness and ethics, and dramatic character and trustworthy ethos.

**Text of paper:**

**Ghosting Authenticity  
Characterization in Corporate Speechwriting**

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**Biographical Note**

Kristine Bruss is an assistant professor and basic course director in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include classical rhetorical theory, speechwriting, and rhetoric pedagogy.

In his book *Writing Great Speeches* (1998), veteran speechwriter Alan Perlman, who penned speeches for executives at General Motors and Kraft Foods in the 1980s and 1990s, identifies the professional techniques that have allowed him to "survive and thrive" in his profession, including understanding the audience, conveying expertise, and supporting points with convincing evidence (p. xvii). He then mentions another important skill, "profiling and reproducing the client's style," but passes over it, noting that it is unique to the ghostwriting profession and thus not relevant to his readers. The skill is quite relevant, however, to those who have an academic or practical interest in professional speechwriting and wish to better understand the dynamics of this distinctive rhetorical activity. As Duffy and Winchell (1989) point out, ghostwriters

must find a "voice" which, though not precisely the voice with which the client ordinarily speaks, captures the essence of the person and creates the image the speaker intends. The process is not imitative, it is representational. The ghostwriter seeks to establish through language a persona that is both interesting and believable. . . . The first criterion of the ghostwritten speech or book is that it sound like the person with whom it will be most intimately identified, the client. (p. 104)<sup>1</sup>

Alan Perlman would concur, and for that reason, he has developed a unique approach to writing in the voice of his clients. In an interview, Perlman described his approach, drawing special attention to a three-level model of stylistic analysis he has developed for the authentic replication of a client's style.<sup>2</sup> In explaining his model, which he considers an original creation, Perlman remarked that the first level, verbal style, is readily recognized by most speechwriters, but the second and third levels, which he labels "rhetorical techniques" and "intellectual character," respectively, are "parts that nobody else gets."<sup>3</sup>

Perlman's claim of originality may indeed hold up among his contemporaries, but his remarks call to mind an ancient practice seldom mentioned in our contemporary rhetorical vocabulary: *ethopoeia*, literally "character-making" (*ethos*, "character" + *poiein*, "to make"). In one of the first ancient accounts of *ethopoeia*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing about the Athenian speechwriter Lysias, remarks,

I also ascribe to Lysias that most pleasing quality (*hê euprepestatê aretê*, "most fitting virtue"), which is generally called characterisation (*êthopoeia*). I am quite unable to find a single person in this orator's speeches who is devoid of character or vitality. There are three departments or aspects in which this quality manifests itself: thought, language, and composition; and I declare him to be successful in all three. (*Lys.* 8, Usher trans., 1974)

The categories that Dionysius identifies in this passage—thought, language, and composition—are not identical to Perlman's, but the overlap is clear. As both schemes suggest, *ethopoeia* is a multi-dimensional activity involving the assessment and representation of ideas and words well-suited to the character of a given speaker.

In this essay, I examine Alan Perlman's contemporary perspective on *ethopoeia*, or characterization, placing him in conversation with ancient writers including Dionysius, Aristotle, and the

Greek authors of *progymnasmata* (composition exercises), who were among the first to theorize about the art. Although Perlman's approach is the primary focus of the essay, the ancient descriptions provide useful points of comparison that highlight the various possibilities, tensions, constraints, and persuasive implications of characterization. By interweaving modern and ancient perspectives, I aim to enhance our conceptual understanding of characterization and inform practice, particularly in the context of business communication, which is Perlman's specialty. Although characterization has long been of theoretical and practical interest to modern scholars, as attested by first-person accounts of speechwriting, ethical critiques, historical case studies, and interview research, remarks on the process tend to be scattered and have not been explored in much depth.<sup>4</sup> The lack of sustained examination is perhaps not surprising, given the challenge of analyzing and explaining characterization. This point is well illustrated by the comments of speechwriter Robert Shrum, who, when asked a series of interview questions about writing in the voice of a client, responded, "Maybe if I reflected as much on the process as the questions you ask—that answering those questions would require me to—I wouldn't be able to do it anymore" (Medhurst & Dreibelbis, 1978, p. 41). The process, largely intuitive, as described by Shrum, does not lend itself easily to dissection.

This is precisely why Perlman's perspective, along with those of the ancient teachers of rhetoric, is so valuable. Like his perceptive predecessors from the classical era, Perlman is well qualified to speak about characterization, for several reasons. First, he holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Chicago, and as such, is accustomed to thinking about his practice in theoretical terms. Second, he has worked with a variety of clients in the course of his career, which has provided him with a range of experiences from which to draw insights about characterization. Third, as a corporate speechwriter with over twenty-five years of experience, Perlman's work has strongly emphasized character-making. In the act of creating a well-worded speech in the style of his client, Perlman claims to prevent "death by speechifying"—specifically, the death of the speaker's reputation (Perlman, 1998, xv). In short, Perlman has been a keen observer of character, a fitting example of Quintilian's claim that speechwriters, like tragic and comic poets, "pay greater attention to characters, because they use many different ones" (*Inst. Or.* 11.1, Russell trans., 2001).

The type of character that Perlman specializes in, as suggested by Quintilian's association of speechwriters with playwrights, is dramatic character, a style-oriented variety of ethos associated with Aristotle's discussion of propriety in book 3 of the *Rhetoric* (3.7.1-7; 3.16.8-9). Whereas ethos as a means of persuasion involves creating a favorable impression of one's own character based on the qualities of wisdom, virtue, and goodwill (see *Rhet.* 2.1.5-7), dramatic character, as Cope (1867) explains, is "a kind of painting or ornament" that involves the faithful depiction of others, as in a narrative.<sup>5</sup> In describing dramatic character, Cope writes:

When we have occasion to pourtray [*sic*] or describe any person, we ought to be acquainted not only with the special characteristics of the individual but also with the generic marks which distinguish the class to which he belongs; whereby the narrative will gain in liveliness, our portrait or description in faithfulness, and our accuracy in these minutiae will convey a favorable impression to the audience of our trustworthiness in general. (p.113)

Cope states that this type of character is relevant to the work of poets, painters, and tragedians; it "was one of the excellences of Sophocles, who was said to be *deinos ethopoiein*" ("very skillful at *ethopoeia*"). Although Cope doesn't mention speechwriters in his commentary, other scholars, such as Carey (1996), have made that connection. According to Carey, ancient theorists and practitioners were generally "slow to grasp the potential of dramatic characterization," with one exception: the speechwriter Lysias, whose lifelike and believable portrayals helped conceal the presence of the speechwriter and enhance the probability of the client's arguments (p. 411). In like fashion, Perlman, too, has associated his work with dramatic characterization, noting in his interview that being a speechwriter is "almost like being a playwright, hearing Mel Gibson say your words."

Speechwriters are not unconcerned with ethos as means of persuasion, of course, but the primary orientation of *ethopoeia* is dramatic, aimed at character portrayal that is both lively and faithful (or alternatively, "interesting and believable," in the words of Duffy and Winchell, or full of character and vitality, as Dionysius suggests). For Perlman, the key term is "authentic." When asked about the desirable persona of executives, Perlman quickly stated, "Authenticity is most important." He is not alone in his emphasis on the importance of authenticity in business communication. Quinlan (2007), for example, asserts that leaders need to be "more personal, authentic, and fallible" (p. 12), while Dewhurst and Fitzpatrick (2007) note that corporate communication training should develop "a natural, human, and authentic style" (para. 9). Not surprisingly, authenticity is one of the key skills Perlman touts on his Web site, explaining that his "linguistic training enables him to analyze and replicate the style of any individual or organization." By replicating a speaker's voice, Perlman is able to create that all-important sense of an authentic, engaging person conversing with his or her listeners, a quality highly valued in the context of contemporary corporate communication.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I present Perlman's approach to ghosting authenticity, first addressing faithfulness to type, then faithfulness to the individual, and finally, faithfulness to nature. Throughout the essay, I integrate the insights of the ancients as well as illustrations from three of Perlman's speeches: Roger Smith's "Humanities and Business," Robert McVicker's "Progress and Innovation," and Robert Eckert's "Business Is Not Basketball." As the analysis reveals, Perlman's perspective on characterization confirms long-standing wisdom about characterization while incorporating unique insights reflective of the contemporary corporate context in which he has worked. Perlman's approach is not likely perfect nor complete, but it does underscore the importance of paying close attention to what makes character distinctive. On a more theoretical level, Perlman's scheme highlights the ethopoetic, character-expressing function of speechwriting while making visible several noteworthy tensions inherent in the practice—tensions between imitation and representation, effectiveness and ethics, and dramatic character and trustworthy ethos. I return to these ideas at the end of the essay.

### **Faithfulness to Type: Speaking Like an Executive**

Alan Perlman had been working at General Motors for just a few weeks when he was asked to write a speech for CEO Roger Smith, who was scheduled to speak at the University of Chicago Business Management Forum.<sup>7</sup> He turned for advice to the vice president of public relations, Jack McNulty, asking: "Jack, what should the chairman say?" McNulty, an experienced speechwriter himself, put his hand on Perlman's shoulder and said, "Alan, why don't you give him a first draft?" Perlman recalled,

From that point, I knew I was going to have to be Roger's alter-intellect. Roger was following in the steps of Thomas Aquinas Murphy, also [like McNulty] Jesuitically educated but, like some of his contemporaries, articulate enough to authentically be the spokesman. Roger was more of an eighties/early-nineties chairman. He loved the business, yet there was still this expectation that the General Motors chairman should be articulate. Jack didn't have the time, found me, and there was a good fit.

Perlman's question, "What should the chairman say?" marks a typical starting point for dramatic characterization, drawing attention to the *type* of character for whom words are being chosen. In the ancient world, students began their ethopoetic exercises in the same way, prompted by questions such as, "What words would a man say to his wife when leaving on a journey? Or a general to his soldiers in time of danger?" (Theon, 8. 115; Kennedy trans., 2003).<sup>8</sup> For *ethopoeia* to be effective, writers must understand what sort of words would be appropriate for different types of characters.

Aristotle addresses this activity in his discussion of the "ethical style" [*êthikê lexis*] at *Rhetoric* 3.7.1-7, one of the passages that Cope (1867) has associated with dramatic ethos. In that passage, Aristotle observes, "The *lexis* will be appropriate if it expresses emotion and character and is proportional to the subject matter" (Kennedy translation, 1991).<sup>9</sup> In explaining how fitting style expresses a sense of character, Aristotle states:

Proof from signs is expressive of character, because there is an appropriate style for each genus and moral state. By *genus* I mean things like age—boy, man, old man—or woman and man or Spartan and Thessalian and by *moral state* [*hexis*] the principles by which someone is the kind of person he is in life; for lives do not have the same character in accordance with [each and] every moral state. If, then, a person speaks words appropriate to his moral state, he will create a sense of character. A rustic and an educated person would not say the same thing nor [say it] in the same way. (*Rhet.* 3.7.6-7)

The key phrase in this passage is "appropriate style": every person possesses a characteristic verbal style reflective of his or her age, gender, place of origin, moral state, and education. In Aristotle's account of *ethopoeia*, couched as it is in a discussion of propriety, the primary aim of character portrayal is plausibility; the "ethical style" expresses character through the use of words that are suitable and fitting for the character being portrayed. Such words ensure that a speaker meets socially and culturally conditioned expectations with respect to character types, which, for the Greeks, was how rhetorical character was assessed (see, e.g., Russell, 1990; Worman, 2002).<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis on character type is evident, as well, in subsequent ancient accounts of *ethopoeia*. Pointing to a somewhat different set of character markers in his description of characterization, Theon observes:

Different ways of speaking would also be fitting *by nature* for a woman and for a man, and *by status* for a slave and a free man, and *by activities* for a soldier and a farmer, and *by state of mind* for a lover and a temperate man, and *by their origin* the words of a Laconian, sparse and clear, differ from those of a man of Attica, which are voluble. We say that Herodotus often

speaks like barbarians although writing in Greek because he imitates their ways of speaking. (Theon 116; Kennedy, p. 48, ital. in original)

Like Aristotle and Theon, Dionysius, too, addresses propriety of style, praising Lysias for his ability to "put words in their [his clients'] mouths which suit their several conditions" (*Lys.* 9).

In Perlman's contemporary practice, the primary "condition" of interest is occupation: "What should the *chairman* say?" Building and maintaining the chairman's image, in a manner consistent with assumptions about the desirable executive type, is a primary responsibility of corporate speechwriters, as Perlman makes clear in his preface to *Writing Great Speeches*: "In the high-pressure, no-mistakes world of executive rhetoric, I manage to keep both my job security and my speakers' reputations from suffering untimely demises. . . . I take care of the CEO's image" (xvi). According to Perlman, the ideal executive type is competent (both intellectually and rhetorically), engaging, and likeable. In describing his work for Roger Smith, Perlman noted,

The chairman of GM back in the eighties had the status that Bill Gates has now; it's hard to believe. He was actually looked upon . . . as somebody who's really intellectually with-it, and I helped produce that. In the case where the chairman is in the industry spotlight, you have to do that, and I had the opportunity to do that for Roger at GM.

With respect to image-making, Perlman's baseline goal is simple: "I keep the speaker, at the very least, from looking like a boring idiot."

For Perlman, the competence dimension of the executive type consists of subject matter expertise and an ability to present that expertise in a compelling and articulate way. The clients for whom Perlman wrote at GM and Kraft possessed a range of technical expertise; it is no small challenge to write credibly about a subject on which the speaker is an expert and the speechwriter a dilettante. How does one write about economics or technology when he or she has no expertise in that area? "That's where a speechwriter has really got to do his or her homework," said Perlman. "If it's a lawyer, no basic errors in legal terminology or phraseology. If it's a financial analyst, lots of reviewing by your buddy in financial analysis. Don't make any dumb mistakes. Guarantee expertise. Have somebody you can call and run it past to make sure you've got it right." Perlman recalled leaning on some friends when he needed quick lessons on economics:

I was writing for Marina Whitman, who is the daughter of John von Neumann, the great mathematician and computer guy. . . . So she's the public affairs vice president of General Motors and giving all kinds of speeches on that, and economics. She was the chief economist. And I had friends, good friends, on the economics staff that I would sit with and get economics lectures from, and learn really fast.

Subject matter precision is only part of the formula, of course. Executive competence also entails the ability to articulate those ideas in a persuasive manner (in keeping with the ideal of the Jesuitically-educated Thomas Aquinas Murphy, whom Perlman described as "articulate enough to authentically be the spokesperson"). In "helping corporate executives say what they wanted to say,"

Perlman observed: "Sometimes they would have it; sometimes they were poor and I had to fill in the pieces." When asked if he thinks executives would be better off writing their own speeches, Perlman responded that time and competence are issues. With respect to the latter, Perlman stated,

I think in the industries where the top people are not actually personable or articulate, they ought to have somebody. Entertainment industry or journalism, probably not. But in something like the oil or chemical industries, where the top folks are fine in finance or engineering but need to get that message across in normal language and bring out their personality, that's where the speechwriter comes in.

Executives must be smart and articulate, but, as this last quotation indicates, they must also be engaging and likable. At one point in the interview, I asked Perlman if he was familiar with Aristotle's three means of persuasion (ethos, pathos, and logos), which he was, and then asked him to comment specifically on the importance of ethos in persuasion. He responded,

They have to like you. They really have to like you. And they can be bored not only by what you say but how you say it. So they must not be bored and turned off. In almost all of my speeches, I do one or two audience scans, and guess what? They are not playing with their spoons. Some are taking notes.

When I asked Perlman if being "not boring" was the most important objective, he responded emphatically, "Yes. All three of Aristotle's means—the appeal of what you're saying, your personality, and your appeal to emotions, when possible, all contribute to holding that connection [to listeners]."

Worth noting here is Perlman's focus on being "not boring" and likeable when talking about ethos. Although he associates these ideas with Aristotle, the Aristotelian conception of ethos, as described at *Rhetoric* 2.1.5-7, focuses on prudence, virtue, and goodwill, qualities expected of trustworthy speakers in particular political communities. Goodwill is linked indirectly to likeability, but it is not the same as being "not boring"; in fact, the ancient Greeks had no word for "boring."<sup>11</sup> Perlman's emphasis on "not boring" could perhaps be interpreted as a distinctly modern perspective on ethos as a means of persuasion, but more likely, it speaks to the centrality of dramatic character in the work of speechwriters. The two forms undoubtedly overlap, but "not boring" (similar to Dionysius's expression *ouk apsychos*, "not lifeless") seems most directly relevant to dramatic characterization, which is concerned first and foremost with the interesting and believable portrayal of a given character type—in Perlman's case, the successful executive.

### **Faithfulness to the Individual: The Perlman Profile**

Faithfulness to type, as described in the previous section, represents the baseline for believable characterization, and in this respect, Perlman differs little from his ancient predecessors, with the exception of his focus on a distinctly modern character: the corporate executive. He takes a step beyond the ancients, however, with his three-level stylistic profile, designed to enhance the authenticity of a speech by capturing a speaker's individual voice. In our interview, Perlman recalled, "One of the greatest comments I ever received was from a client's wife, who said [to her spouse], 'I can't believe you didn't

write that. You didn't write that?' He [the client] told me that. He made a point of telling me that—'You're good.' It's supposed to actually be transparent. And not inauthentic. Transparent and authentic. There's no obvious fakery." Speechwriters have identified a number of useful strategies for expressing the unique voice of their clients, including reading books and speeches by the client and analyzing or drawing from tape recorded comments (see, e.g., Duffy & Winchell, 1989; Einhorn, 1988; Patton, 2002), but these strategies are not typically considered as part of a systematic framework or heuristic for individual characterization. Perlman has taken that step with his three-level stylistic profile, which addresses verbal style, rhetorical techniques, and intellectual character.

### **Level One: Verbal Style**

Perlman begins his analysis of the client's manner of speaking at the fundamental level of verbal style. As he explained,

Most stylisticians acknowledge that somehow you've got to replicate the speaker's syntax. However you can, make it sound like him or her. I'm talking in terms of really simple things like short sentences, long sentences, whatever. When you're a linguist you can actually identify sentence types, sentence patterns. And you can go further; I have a very elaborate stylistic profiling process in which I identify vocabulary items and levels of vocabulary, so if he says this word, not only does he use this word but uses equally sophisticated words.

Perlman's finely tuned sense of differences in expression is attributable in large part to his advanced study of linguistics, which taught him to analyze style and texts, such as those in Old and Middle English, in a variety of ways.<sup>12</sup> "That's how it was done, *explication du texte*. . . . The whole linguistic mentality of being objective about language—I very quickly detached myself from words to see how they were used." As a linguist, Perlman brings to the task of speechwriting a useful set of categories with which to analyze style (e.g., syntax, vocabulary, sentence length) as well as a thorough understanding of the implications of particular choices in each of those categories. This knowledge enables him to write in a manner that strikes the client and the audience as fitting and authentic.

Perlman's focus on individual stylistic markers differs from the advice of the ancients, who provide largely generic prescriptions for ethopoetic style. Aphthonius, for example, advises students to "elaborate the characterization in a style that is clear, concise, fresh, pure, free from any inversion and figure" (11.35R; Kennedy, p. 116). Dionysius likewise recommends "clear, standard, ordinary" words, noting that "all forms of pompous, outlandish, and contrived language are foreign to characterization" (*Lys.* 8). Other authors, such as Aristotle and Theon, simply note that characters differ in the way they speak (e.g., "A rustic and an educated man would not say the same thing, nor [say it] in the same way"; *Rhet.* 3.7.7). These generic prescriptions are entirely in keeping with the idea of typed character, yet interestingly, there is some evidence of individual characterization in ancient speeches. Scholars such as Forman (1896) and Usher (1965), for example, have argued that at least some of the characters in the speeches of Lysias are unique individuals. In support of this claim, Forman argues that the speaker in "For the Disabled Man" (*Lys. Or.* 24) is an individual because, of all of Lysias's characters, he alone places the adjective *pas* (every; all) after, rather than before, the noun, which is the expected syntactical

pattern. Pointing to different stylistic markers, Usher equates short syllables with nervousness and shyness in "Against Simon" (*Lys. Or.* 3) and polysyndeton with mental confusion in "On the Death of Eratosthenes" (*Lys. Or.* 1). Such findings show, as Forman states, "how slight a touch is needed to individualize a character" (p. 106).

These are the types of subtle stylistic distinctions to which Perlman attends. Although clients have generally appreciated his accuracy, they have not always been pleased with his representation of their style. Perlman recalled one client who insisted that a speech Perlman had written did not sound like him. On the contrary, Perlman says, he nailed the client's style perfectly. "I swear to you this day I had his style right; he just didn't want to sound like that. . . . He didn't want to sound like an academic of German descent for whom English was a second language. He wanted to sound like a computer guy."

### **Level Two: Rhetorical Techniques**

Verbal style may be the most obvious marker of a client's voice, but according to Perlman, there are two other important dimensions of an individual's rhetorical style to consider when writing in character. Perlman labels one of these dimensions "rhetorical techniques," a rather broad category that, as Perlman makes clear in the following explanation, refers to a client's preferred ways of making a point.

How does he or she like to prove things and explain things? Tell jokes? Give facts? Amazing facts? Historical references? Stories with anecdotes? Whatever it is—maybe it's a mix of all three, or something I haven't discovered yet. The categories are open-ended. You've got to figure out what that person's most comfortable way to get a point across is. Don't give them an argument they couldn't possibly make or drop in quotes they couldn't possibly have read. You've got to be Ronald Reagan to carry that off [*chuckles*].

The category of "rhetorical techniques" is perhaps the most unique element of Perlman's approach to characterization. The techniques themselves are not novel; rather, the novelty derives from the association of such techniques with individual character. Consider once again Aristotle's observation that "the rustic and the educated person would not say the same thing, nor [say it] in the same way," or Theon's remark about Herodotus speaking "like Barbarians although writing in Greek because he imitates their ways of speaking" (116; Kennedy p. 48). What does it mean to speak like an educated person, or like a Barbarian? Theon points to verbal style as the differentiating factor, saying in another example that "the words of a Laconian, sparse and clear, differ from those of a man of Attica, which are voluble" (116). As for Aristotle, he does not elaborate in his discussion of propriety in book 3, but he does get at Perlman's notion of rhetorical techniques elsewhere in the *Rhetoric*. In book 2, for example, Aristotle contrasts the enthymeme with dialectical syllogisms, then states: "This is the reason why the uneducated are more persuasive than the educated [when speaking] before crowds, just as the poets say the uneducated are more "inspired by the Muses" in a crowd; for [the educated] reason with axioms [*koine*] and universals, [the uneducated] on the basis of what [particulars] they know and instances near their experience" (2.22.3). He makes a similar distinction regarding maxims and storytelling, noting that both are "appropriate to those older in years" (*Rhet.* 2.21.9). Outside of brief examples like these, the

ancient accounts provide little insight on the matter of rhetorical techniques and the expression of character.

To get a better sense of how rhetorical techniques might vary from speaker to speaker, I examined several of Perlman's speeches, written for different clients. Roger Smith's "Humanities and Business," for example, sounds much like a classroom lecture. The structure is clear, and each point is illustrated with examples, many of them drawn from the auto industry or General Motors. In comparison, Kraft executive Bob Eckert, in the speech "Business Is Not Basketball," frequently utilizes rhetorical questions (and answers) to make his points about leadership. To wit: "And Bill Clinton has the 'misfortune' to be President in a time of peace and prosperity. How would he have performed in Operation Desert Storm -- or in a crisis like the one Truman faced? We'll probably never know." The questions continue throughout the speech: "How about books like *Leadership Secrets of Atilla the Hun*?" "Is it really possible that coaches like Woody Hayes or generals like Douglas MacArthur, great as they were, would have had the same success as business leaders?"

In another speech, "Progress and Innovation," Kraft executive Robert McVicker makes distinctive use of science stories and examples to illustrate his points about innovation. McVicker, like Smith, includes examples from his own company, but only after setting the stage with tales of invention and innovation from the past. Listeners hear about Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine, William Burrough's adding machine, the mechanical inventions of the ancient Greeks, innovations spurred by World War I, and the "treasure ships" of China. Perlman, recounting how the speech was created, said the stories were well-suited to McVicker's style.

We sat together with two very smart guys from the Kraft R & D Center who were on his staff. And we started talking about innovation; that's really all. And somebody made this remark: "Invention and innovation don't happen together." So I had a point. And then Bob McVicker was convinced: "We don't have progress without innovation; that's my point I want to make." Okay [*laughs*]! So we had to distinguish between invention and innovation; now we go into McVicker's message.

In our interview, Perlman dissected "Progress and Innovation" paragraph by paragraph, identifying the sources of the ideas: "This [*pointing to the printed text*] is all stuff I read about progress and innovation. This is an example they came up with, that McVicker came up with. The World War I example and all this stuff is right from McVicker. Then I segued into the Manhattan Project." Perlman continued in this fashion, indicating his own contributions, McVicker's, and material drawn from other sources, such as company rhetoric and other speeches. "A point he [McVicker] made during the discussion is that some work is not even like work, so I developed that point. And he said this [*pointing to a paragraph addressing the importance of college composition classes and literature*]. He said that about the X factor. He likes Levoisier. All these examples [of great innovators, like Thomas Edison and Buckminster Fuller] are his. They were more interdisciplinary men. More like McVicker." These "McVickersque" examples, many of which were contributed by the speaker himself, are central to believable, individualized portrayal.

### **Level Three: Intellectual Character**

The science examples just described reflect not only McVicker's preferred rhetorical techniques but also his intellectual character, which is the third dimension of Perlman's stylistic profile. "Somehow you have got to figure out what this person knows, and beyond business, if anything. And then bring in additional knowledge at that level, whatever that is. You can use a quote from a movie the speaker has probably seen, you can use quotes from any business publications—he's probably read them. You must be honest intellectually as well as rhetorically and stylistically." All of Perlman's clients were smart enough to rise to positions of leadership, but they differed with respect to intellectual breadth and interests. Some, according to Perlman, possessed impressive disciplinary or professional knowledge but had few interests beyond that. Others, following the Thomas Aquinas Murphy model, exhibited wider-ranging intellectual interests.

Perlman's category of "intellectual character" bears a resemblance to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, as both describe an intellectual dimension of character that inspires belief through a display of the speaker's knowledge. For example, speakers can use maxims, according to Aristotle, to show their experience and education (*Rhet.* 2.21.9), just as the modern corporate speaker might use quotations to convey those qualities. Although there is a similarity between *phronesis* and "intellectual character," the two are not identical. Whereas *phronesis* emphasizes "forming opinions rightly," Perlman's notion of intellectual character, as an element of dramatic character, is concerned primarily with creating a sense of authentic portrayal through a particular display of knowledge. Put differently, trustworthy ethos relies on a speaker appearing prudent, whereas believable dramatic character relies on a speaker appearing "intellectually with-it." McVicker's speech on innovation provides a fitting example of what Perlman regards as intellectual character. Reflecting on McVicker's supporting material, Perlman stated, "McVicker could truly make up these things. . . . He was a broadly educated man. He could plausibly talk about the history of science and technology, and he could even get away with all this stuff, which is interdisciplinary—trying to figure out what causes innovation."

Although the goal of plausibility may be more easily achieved with a client who actually possesses the intellectual character expressed in the speech, Perlman emphasizes that this is not necessary for plausible portrayal. Words that are fitting and appropriate, from Perlman's perspective, are those that *could have* plausibly originated with that client. Consider, for example, a remark such as, "I recall reading a speech by Winston Churchill, in which he observed . . ." The remark suggests that the speaker has actually read and remembered the words of Churchill, but, according to Perlman, the speaker need not have read Churchill to maintain the appearance of authenticity. It simply needs to be plausible that the speaker *might* have read the speech, or been able to recall the words. As Perlman notes: "You have to realize that credibility can be stretched in many ways. Executives *get* quotes. They get publications that have quotes. So that gives a speechwriter a lot of leeway. Okay, so he read the publication. And they *do* get publications with quotes." As long as it is plausible that speakers could have encountered the material about which they speak, they will seem authentic. Perlman adds, "I really would challenge you to go through any of my speeches and say, 'He couldn't know that.' Because I'll figure out some way that he could've, and you will know it when you hear it as the audience. Somebody told him."

Smith's "Humanities and Business" illustrates this point well. According to Perlman, Smith lacked a substantial "non-business orating persona"; consequently, it may have been a stretch to put a

thoughtful defense of the humanities into the mouth of someone with little experience in that area. Surely, Smith's comments in the speech about life in the corporate world would raise no suspicion, but his elaboration on the values of humanistic study just might. To address this challenge, Perlman opted to have Smith acknowledge his lack of first-hand experience with the humanities and offer his observations from the position of one with limited knowledge (e.g., "Now, I don't have first-hand experience in these matters, but from a layman's perspective . . ."). With such comments, Smith wards off impressions of inauthenticity; although he has little direct experience with the humanities, he appears to have gained knowledge from other, reliable sources. A listener may have lingering doubts about whether Smith would genuinely be interested in advocating for the humanities, but Smith seems to have a good grasp of how the business and humanities communities can work together, thanks to his broadly-educated speechwriter.

Smith's intellectual character in "Humanities and Business" may have been plausible, but it complicates the notion of "faithful" representation. When describing "Humanities and Business," Perlman stated, "It was my speech. That was one of maybe ten percent, or five or seven percent, that were truly mine." He added, "I pushed as far as I could with Roger. That was a tough one, because there were some really sophisticated ideas in that speech. They're essentially reflective of my early experience, the humanities skills that were enabling me to survive." If the speech were judged by the ethical standards of critics such as Bormann (1961), Nichols (1963), and Jamieson (1988), it would likely not fare well, for it failed to portray the speaker's "true" self to listeners. On artistic grounds, however, Perlman used the strategies available to portray Smith as effectively as possible.<sup>13</sup> Perlman's approach, focused as it is on plausibility, is quite consistent with the practice of ancient speechwriters. As Dionysius writes of Lysias, "He often makes us believe in his client's good character by referring to the circumstances of his life and his parentage, and often again by describing his past actions and the principles governing them. And when the facts fail to provide him with such material, he creates his own moral tone, making his character seem by their speech to be trustworthy and honest" (*Lys.* 19). Just as Lysias relied on the client's own experiences and actions (the "facts" of his client's character) in his portrayals, Perlman, too, worked with as much of Smith's own character as he could, then filled in the pieces according to an idealized version of what Smith should convey. The key for Perlman is that the portrayal *seemed* faithful. Said Perlman, "The best you can do is [*speaking in the voice of the client*]: "Hey, I wrote this. Let me read you what I wrote."

### **Faithfulness to Nature: Conversational Style**

Perlman's focus on plausible portrayal is aptly reflected in one his favorite quotations, from Jonathan Swift: "In oratory the greatest art is to hide art." The art of characterization depends, in large measure, on faithfulness to natural ways of speaking, a subject Perlman said he "could talk about for fifteen minutes." The subject gets substantial attention, as well, in Dionysius's discussion of *ethopoeia*, accounting for half of *Lysias* 8. According to Dionysius, "characterisation is achieved not by periodic structure and the use of rhythms, but by loosely constructed sentences." He adds that Lysias's natural, spontaneous-sounding composition

seems, as it were, not to be contrived or formed by any conscious art. . . . Yet it is more carefully composed than any work of art. For this artlessness is itself the product of art: the relaxed

structure is really under control, and it is in the very illusion of not having been composed with masterly skill that the mastery lies. Therefore the student of realism and naturalism would not go wrong if he were to follow Lysias in his composition, for he will find no model who is more true to life. (*Lys.* 8)

Consistent with ancient teachings on the art of artlessness, Perlman emphasized that it takes effort to create spontaneous-sounding style. "It's like creating something that you work on and work on, so it sounds like the guy just got up there and decided to share a few thoughts and say some things."

Perlman employs a variety of strategies for creating the conversational, personal style that he favors in his speeches, among them the liberal use of first-person pronouns. Just as conversations typically include frequent references to those participating in the conversation, so, too, do Perlman's speeches feature frequent references to the speaker and his or her listeners, as in the following example from McVicker's "Progress and Innovation": "Let's face it, to some degree you're going to be responsible for the progress of the society in which you will be leaders. And so I thought I might help you prepare for that role, by offering a few thoughts on just what innovation is . . . why we need it . . . how we get it" (p. 533). McVicker's language gets its conversational quality not only from the first-person pronouns but also from the informal sounding contractions, simple syntax, conjunctions at the beginnings of sentences, and the colloquial expression, "Let's face it." McVicker sounds like he's talking to friends, thus creating a sense of similarity between himself and his listeners.

The conversational style, according to Perlman, increases a speaker's "listenability"; if a speaker is "listenable," or capable of holding the attention of the audience, he or she is more likely to be perceived favorably. He explained:

A speech is a communication from one human being to a group of others. It's like a conversation, but not like a conversation; like a TV program, but not like a TV program. It's a one-way, low-tech form of personal communication. So it's really important that the audience get a sense of who the kind of person is that's communicating with them. [*Adopting the voice of listeners*]: 'Oh, he's telling interesting science stories. I like his style already!'

By making the speaker "listenable" and likeable, the conversational style helps to create a sense of relationship between the speaker and his or her listeners. As Branham and Pearce (1996) have pointed out, the conversational style is a strategic choice "through which the speaker seeks to assign or disperse power and responsibility, and to reconstitute the relationship between speaker and audience" (p. 424). Addressing this relationship, Perlman remarked, "Corporate America has gotten much more egalitarian, and, as with politicians, audiences want to feel that the CEO is like them. So, no high-falutin' thoughts, and a lot more about business, and personal stories have definitely replaced narrative jokes."<sup>14</sup>

Without this natural, personal style, speeches may lack authentic-sounding characterization, or lack characterization, period. One threat to believable characterization is something Perlman calls "speech speech." Perlman mentioned this style of speaking (or type of speech) several times during the interview, always offering a negative appraisal. For Perlman, "speech speech" characterizes many of the texts in *Vital Speeches* as well as political rhetoric. "A lot of public speeches are in a different language, and it's not English," Perlman remarked. He asserted that the committee process through which many

speeches are produced contributes to this sort of style. "It's a lot of 'We must . . .' and 'Our challenge in the twenty-first century is . . .' I'll just go through a political speech and show you, people don't talk like this." The persuasive implications of such speech, as ancient authors have pointed out, can be serious. According to Aristotle, artificial-sounding composition makes listeners "resentful, as at someone plotting against them" (*Rhet.* 3.2.4). Another fourth-century Greek author, Alcidas, makes a similar connection, claiming that speeches that "have abandoned both the spontaneous and that which more closely resembles the truth . . . fill the minds of their hearers with distrust and resentment" (*On the Sophists* 12, Muir translation, 2001). Artless language, "itself the product of art," mimics spontaneous, seemingly heartfelt utterances, thus enhancing the perceived authenticity of the speaker.

By writing in a way that mimics nature—both the general nature of ordinary conversation and the individual nature of the client, Perlman makes his clients seem like "real" people—interesting, authentic speakers who can relate to their listeners. Of course, for a character portrayal to be truly interesting and engaging, the client must be able to perform his or her part convincingly, which is one other important function of skillful characterization. Artless style enables convincing performance. Before listeners can be persuaded by the character of the speaker, the client must be persuaded to recognize himself or herself in the "I" in the text. As Perlman points out, if the style of a speech is not natural and familiar, the likely response from a client will be: "Doesn't sound like me. I won't read something that sounds like it's written by someone else." At a recent panel discussion on speechwriting, an executive client confirmed this point, saying, "I want it to be me, not them [the speechwriter]. I like it when they get me talking, to bring out the natural character, natural strengths, instead of 'What do you want to say?' At the end of the day, the most important thing is to be sincere" (Jones, et al., 2009). The skilled speechwriter, through the use of natural, conversational language, plays an important role in helping the client convey that impression.

### **Reflections on Characterization: Three Tensions**

Characterization, unlike eloquent phrasing or powerful policy statements, does not typically win attention or accolades from audiences, and for good reason. As described by Perlman, skillful characterization does not call attention to itself. Yet it deserves notice, for it plays a vital role in conveying an impression of believable, engaging character. The skillful ghost is a master of mimesis, attuned to character types, the distinctive characteristics of speakers, and patterns of conversational speech. The result is the seemingly natural, artless expression of character, an aesthetic ideal valued by practitioners in ancient as well as contemporary times. In the context of the ancient courtroom, the expression of "true-to-life," moral character might mean the difference between conviction and acquittal. In contemporary corporate America, the expression of authentic, "not boring" personality inspires confidence in the leadership, and in the organization the speaker represents.

The ethopoetic framework presented in this essay helps to explain how speechwriters "ghost" this sense of authenticity, but at the same time, it raises a number of questions about the process, three of which I would like to address here. The first concerns imitative practice. How accurately should a client's distinctive characteristics be represented? Or put differently, what is the appropriate blend of imitation and representation? For the sake of authenticity, it would seem advisable to replicate a client's style precisely, which would create a more distinctive impression of the speaker's character. On the other hand, completely faithful reproduction might undermine other elements of the speech, including

clarity or the creation of a desirable image (which seems to be the complaint of Perlman's client who wanted to "sound like a computer guy"). If one were to replicate a speaker's style with complete accuracy, the verbal fillers, convoluted expressions, and false starts that characterize some styles would have to remain. That sort of character portrayal may be effective in a novel or a *Saturday Night Live* skit, but not in a speech (unless one is impersonating a somewhat inarticulate third party in a narrative). As scholar Craig Smith has remarked, the speechwriter aims, rather, to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses, thus creating the most polished and persuasive, yet authentic version of the speaker possible. Perlman echoes this point in *Writing Great Speeches* by comparing speaking to acting, noting, "The character you're playing is yourself. You want to be the most persuasive, effective YOU that you can be" (p. 160). Hence, "faithful" reproduction involves representing not all aspects of a client's style, but only those that put the client in his or her best light while retaining an air of authenticity.

This formulation of effective character portrayal, with its emphasis on representation and appearances, leads to the second question: When does characterization cross an ethical line? As is evident from this analysis, "authenticity," or "true-to-life" portrayal, is a rhetorical creation. The rhetorical nature of authenticity may, understandably, inspire the sort of cynicism and distrust expressed long ago by Plato and reinforced more recently by speechwriting critics (e.g., Bormann, 1961; Jamieson, 1988; Nichols, 1963) and scholars such as George Yoos (1979), who has argued that ethos, as described in classical accounts, should not be conflated with "ethical appeal." As Yoos states, "Aristotle's emphasis on portrayal, not just on the display of qualities possessed by the speaker, lays a foundation for dissimulation" (p. 45).

In his interview, Perlman responded to such criticisms, saying, "I agree in principle, but there's a downside. The person who is doing that is taking a risk that he may not be able to carry it off, and that people will glaze over and turn off. There's a downside and a risk to inauthenticity, and having a tin ear. And I'm very, very conscious of that." Perlman's comments suggest that characterization should mirror as much as possible the client's "real" self, lest the client, in his or her failure to "carry it off," expose the performance as false. Ethical portrayal is implicated here, but the primary focus is on effectiveness; note that in Perlman's formulation, inauthentic portrayal doesn't inspire condemnation but rather a loss of attention and interest, the same sort of reaction that moviegoers might have to cardboard characters in a film. The matter of authenticity, real or feigned, has more serious implications, however. In her litany of concerns about speechwriting, Kathleen Hall Jamieson identified a danger of apparent authenticity, stating: "The candidate able to speak the words of others with sincerity and conviction will have the advantage over those whose tone and inflections betray the act of deception" (p. 230). Clearly, speechwriters make possible a range of outcomes through their ethopoetic artistry, from bringing out the best in the client's personality to deceiving an audience. From an artistic standpoint, characterization may be a "most fitting excellence" of style, but informed listeners should be wary of its power.

The third and final question for consideration, related to the power of characterization, is more theoretical: What role does dramatic characterization play in the creation of trustworthy ethos? Ethos has long been recognized as a potent type of rhetorical proof; as Aristotle observes in the *Rhetoric*, "character is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion" (1.2.4). While this may be the case with respect to the speaker-centered ethos referred to in this passage, the persuasive role of dramatic character is less clear, and has at times been minimized. Cope (1867), for example, suggests

that dramatic characterization "aids in some slight degree by imparting to the speech an air of truthfulness and fidelity" (p. 112). Wisse (1988) adopts a similar stance, arguing that that the style-oriented expression of character described by Aristotle in book 3 of the *Rhetoric* "has nothing to do with ethos, the means of persuasion" (p. 48). These assessments are likely accurate with respect to the description of minor characters in a narrative, but speechwriting is a special case of character portrayal, as writers such as Dionysius and Carey (1996) seem to recognize in their assessment of the moral persuasiveness and charm of Lysias's ethopoetic art.

Perlman's comments, likewise, point to a blurring of lines between dramatic character and ethos as a means of persuasion in the context of speechwriting. Although the primary aim of dramatic characterization is fidelity or authenticity of portrayal, Perlman's remarks suggest that authenticity is more than mere ornamentation. In the context of Perlman's work, effective characterization makes speakers "listenable" and likeable while enabling them to perform convincingly, which contributes to a positive reputation. Conversely, inauthentic, artificial characterization—the stuff of "speech-speech"—can lead to "death by speechifying." Future research might delve more deeply into how this "death" occurs, rhetorically, and what role ghosted authenticity plays in preventing or hastening that demise, particularly in image-building speeches. As suggested by Jamieson's comments, perceived authenticity, which is often associated with "speaking from the heart," can be quite persuasive, giving authentic-sounding leaders an edge with listeners. Whether this authenticity is best conceptualized as the aesthetic counterpart of trustworthy ethos, or a necessary precondition for positive assessments of ethos, or part and parcel of modern ethos itself remains a question for future study. Whatever the case, the ability to craft such authenticity is an important element of ghosted style, one that should be recognized alongside the more familiar stylistic excellences of clarity, conciseness, and well-turned phrases.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Although Duffy and Winchell's observation undoubtedly resonates with many speechwriters, not all ghosts are concerned with creating this sort of persona, particularly when they are working collaboratively on a document, such as a memo or a letter. For an example of this type of ghostwriting in a military organization, see Henry (1995).

<sup>2</sup> The 90-minute, semi-structured interview was conducted November 12, 2004, in Highland Park, Illinois. All subsequent quotations from Perlman, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the interview transcript, which was reviewed and approved by Perlman.

<sup>3</sup> Perlman's labels are somewhat imprecise, particularly "rhetorical techniques," which could be an overarching description of his entire model. "Style" (manner of expression) and "character" (one's distinctive qualities, or, as defined by Aristotle at *Poetics* 6, "that which reveals moral choice") are a bit slippery, too, with "intellectual character" identified as an element of a client's style in Perlman's three-level analysis. Despite the temptation to fine-tune the terminology, I will employ Perlman's language when discussing his profile.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Humes, 1997; Noonan, 1990; Waldman, 2000 (first-person accounts); Bormann, 1961; Jamieson, 1988; Nichols, 1963 (ethical critiques); Ritter & Medhurst, 2002; Schlesinger, 2008 (historical studies); Duffy & Winchell, 1989; Einhorn 1988, 1994; Medhurst & Dreibelbis, 1978, 1986; Smith, 1976 (interviews).

<sup>5</sup> For additional insights on dramatic character, see Carey, 1996; Hughes, 1994; Sattler, 1947.

<sup>6</sup> The demand for authenticity is not unique to business communication. As Umberto Eco (1986) has argued, America is "a country obsessed with realism, where, if a construction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a 'real' copy of the reality being represented" (p. 4). Although ghosted texts may not be in quite the same category as wax museums, dioramas, and Disneyland, Eco's commentary provides a provocative lens through which to consider the act of "ghosting authenticity."

<sup>7</sup> Roger Smith was CEO of General Motors from 1981-1990. He was known for his innovations at GM as well as his role in Michael Moore's 1989 documentary *Roger & Me*.

<sup>8</sup> Theon addresses characterization under the heading *prosopopoeia*, which he defines as "the introduction of a person to whom words are attributed that are suitable to the speaker and have an indisputable application to the subject discussed." In his exercise, Theon directs students to keep in mind the "personality" of the speaker; the Greek term here, *prosopon*, is related to the Latin *persona*, meaning face, mask, or outward appearance. Other Greek exercises differentiate between *ethopoeia*, in which words are chosen for a known person, and *prosopopoeia*, which personifies a subject such as the sea. (All subsequent references to the *progymnasmata* are drawn from the Kennedy translation, which include the works of Theon, pseudo-Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nicolaus.)

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle's "ethical style" is interchangeable with "ethopoetic style," as both refer to style that expresses character.

<sup>10</sup> As Russell (1990) argues in his remarks on ethos in Greek oratory, characters in the speeches of writers such as Lysias "are normally recognized types, not individuals in the round" (p. 198).

Elaborating on the idea of typed character, Worman (2002) observes, "What a person is likely to do or what is fitting that he can do can only be assessed by means of witnessing that he is a particular type (i.e., of a given status, stature, disposition)" (p. 7). Although this is a familiar argument, there is some evidence of individuality in ancient character portrayal; see p. 13 of this essay.

<sup>11</sup> The term boredom, of unknown etymology, is an invention of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as attested in the *OED*. Perlman's emphasis on "not boring," authentic ethos points to a need to continually reassess the nature and persuasive function of rhetorical character, particularly in genres and contexts not accounted for by Aristotle, such as the hybrid types of corporate speeches identified by Thro (2009); of particular relevance is the common genre of executive speeches that emphasizes the sharing of a thought leader's perspective. Notably, all three of Perlman's speeches mentioned in this essay fall into that category.

<sup>12</sup> Perlman's emphasis on the value of textual analysis is echoed by former presidential speechwriter Craig Smith, who notes that in a speechwriting class, he would have students study Shakespeare to see how he "used style and plot to advance character" (Einhorn, 1994, p. 134).

<sup>13</sup> In Perlman's job, "effective portrayal" never meant espousing positions that he deemed unethical or making devious clients seem upright. He described his clients as "legally airtight," adding, "I respected all of them. I did."

<sup>14</sup> Consistent with Perlman, Beason (1991) identifies similitude, or the indication of similarity between the speaker and listeners, as one type of "signalled ethos" in corporate speeches.