

## Book Reviews

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*Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail.*  
MURRAY EDELMAN. New York: Academic Press, 1977.

Kenneth Burke describes political rhetoric as a secular variant of prayer. He defines the primary function of this ritualistic usage of language as sharpening up the pointless and blunting the sharply pointed.<sup>1</sup> Burke's principle is the fundamental insight upon which Murray Edelman constructs his analysis of the way language is used in American politics to sustain problematic beliefs, which facilitate quiescent acceptance of chronic poverty and inequality. Edelman's exposition of the political implications of the "banal languages" of everyday life is distinguished by a rigorous, but reflexive, theoretical framework. This framework allows Edelman to display remarkable sensitivity to the rhetorical nuances of contemporary forms of political discourse in which metaphor, metonymy, and syntax are enlisted to evoke mythic cognitive structures in the minds of members of elite as well as non-elite groups.

In his "Introduction," Michael Lipsky notes the modesty of Edelman's presentation: "Edelman seems to write as if he feels he has slightly less to say than first appearance might indicate" (xxii). The prose style is simple and straightforward. The focus upon the practical implications of mystifications of the languages of the helping professions—bureaucracy, inquiry, authority, participation, and resistance—is never diverted. The metonymic power of such terms as "fact," "value," "human nature," "social system," "crisis," "public opinion," "pre-delinquent," and "political prisoner," to evoke larger structures of belief is explored in mundane detail. Yet in the process, Edelman manages to synthesize and to translate an esoteric set of ideas drawn from such sources as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Schutz, Merleau-Ponty, Levi-Strauss, Chomsky, Toulmin, Basil Bernstein, and Harold Garfinkel, into a vocabulary immediately accessible to the policy maker, poverty worker, or welfare rights activist.

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The meta-theory of Edelman's perspective provides the foundation for this virtuoso performance. Edelman is one of the few social scientists who has peered into the "ultimate abyss," discerned by Burke, and returned to report his discoveries. Burke describes the perils of the journey: ". . . however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall 'picture' is but a construct of our symbolic systems. To mediate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that's one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naive verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality."<sup>2</sup>

Edelman faces the implications of humankind's inextricable entanglement in its hermeneutic circle without retreating to the security of the positivistic residues of most ethnomethodology and without lapsing into the political relativism of most other branches of phenomenology.

Confronting the abyss frees Edelman of the imperatives of what Nietzsche described as the "dogma of immaculate perception." Edelman recognizes that perception involves categorization [c.f. Chomsky] and that language is an emergent process in which thought and expression are simultaneously constituted [c.f. Merleau-Ponty]. Thus, he asserts, "It is only in naming situations or characteristics that they are conceived, communicated and perceived; and it is because naming also amounts to categorizing and abstracting . . . that actors and spectators on the political scene create aspects of the scene that are not observable and may be non-existent" (p. 24). Edelman acknowledges that we all play "language games"—including Edelman. Consequently, he contends a "dramaturgy of objectivism" is a particularly inappropriate pose to assume in a study which seeks to analyze the ties between observation and social situations, and to probe the range of perceptions about social issues that people regard as "facts." He maintains that "how political events are perceived defines the observer as surely as he or she defines them" (p. 10). He therefore concedes (p. 13): "Any study that focuses on the problematic character of strongly held

beliefs is accordingly bound to offend many people because it calls attention to the warrant for conclusions different from those the believer accepts as rational and empirically based. It also calls attention to the warrant for a wider range of observations than those conventionally defined as adequate. . . . Beliefs about common issues that seem to be empirically based depend partly on values and the suppression of data."

"Facts" are defined by the rules of our language games. Observations of "fact" rest, at least in part, "upon ideological presuppositions when people with authority, privileges, status, or money justify the denial of these values to others" (p. 12).

Edelman does not attempt to evade responsibility for his own entanglement in the *circulus vitiosus* he spins (p. 16): "Like the language forms I explore, the language in which I write is evocative. Reader and writer seem to be wandering through a hall of mirrors or clambering around the perspective of a cubist political scene. But so are the political spectator and the political actor, and in view of the 'fact', how can we best *really* see them?"

Edelman, of course, does not believe that we can really see them. Hence, he regards the deductive logical forms and devices for verification recommended by conventional social science methodologies as inappropriate tools for reconstructing the mosaic of "tiny slivers of reality" which sustain the symbolic structures of American political discourse. The consensual models of political speech produced by these means are necessarily ideological. Further, these procedures discourage the self-critical and tentative posture which all studies in this ideologically imploded area need to maintain. Edelman therefore contends the claims that a post-Burkean student of political rhetoric attaches to his or her inquiry must be modest. "Plausibility" provides the epistemological warrant. Coherent patterns of words about events are constructed. Resonance within the community of discourse becomes the "test": validation, affirmation, or negation of the "truth" of these scenarios. Consequently, the reader as well as the writer is encumbered with the burden of reflexivity (p. 14): "Because the whole point of studies of political symbolism is to examine the evocation of alternative cognitions, they polarize readers who are committed to their own perceptions . . . some

are likely to confuse a statement that an alternative to their own perspective is tenable with a claim that that alternative is reality. If the analytic utility of the notion of multiple realities [c.f. Schutz] is growing, it is still far from common."

Edelman admits that preferences in regard to this epistemological issue reflect different degrees of willingness to tolerate ambiguity about the nature of the political world. His commitment to reflexivity prevents him from asserting epistemological privilege for his own stance.

The resonance of Edelman's constructions is their test. Because I share most of Edelman's theoretical allegiances and some of his political sympathies, I experienced a strong shock of recognition in reviewing his scenarios on the polarizing functions of American political language—its capacity to support ambiguity, project false issues, fragment dissent, and sustain subsidiary awareness of ambiguous sets of political symbols and gestures. His Szazian translations of the languages of therapy into the language of power, based upon careful textual analysis of professional journals in the mental health professions, is a distinguished piece of scholarship. However, some of his constructions are skewed by a systematic neglect of the role violence, or threats of violence, play in shaping the symbols of American political rhetoric, e.g., his interpretation (following Sarbin) of popular perceptions of "the dangerous classes." Even the categorical structuring of Edelman's prose conspires to de-focalize the pornography of violence, e.g., he fatuously subsumes "the Jews of Nazi Germany and Russia at the turn of the century, the heretics under the Inquisition, the Catholics during the Know-Nothing persecutions of the 1830's, the American Indians in the nineteenth century, the counterculture in the 1960's" within a common category as victims of "intense animas" who were "later recognized as innocent of the evil contemporaries saw in them" (p. 33). Perhaps a consideration of the scatological usages (e.g., the Watergate tapes) of recent power groups would have been instructive in revealing how close sado-sexual imagery hovers near the edges of the rhetoric of authority in America. But, of course, violence is a failure of political language, and Edelman has chosen to focus upon its successes.

Ralph Waldo Emerson maintained that the world belongs to the person who can see through its pretense. Murray Edelman has done a remarkable job in providing a set of lenses for seeing through the pretense of words that succeed and policies that fail in American politics.

Sue Curry Jansen

*Department of Sociology*  
*State University of New York at Buffalo*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth E. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1945), p. 393. Quoted by Murray Edelman in *Politics As Symbolic Action* (New York: Academic Press, 1971), p. 169; and again in *Political Language*, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth E. Burke, *Language As Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 5. Quoted by Edelman in *Politics As Symbolic Action*, p. 2.

*Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict*. SAMUEL IJSSELING.

Trans. Paul Dunphy. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976. Pp. vi + 142.

The first fifteen chapters of this insightful book discuss the modern rehabilitation of rhetoric and positions taken on the relative usefulness of philosophy and rhetoric by Plato, the early sophists, Aristotle, the Romans, St. Augustine, scholastics of the Middle Ages, Italian humanists, Bacon, Descartes, Pascal, Reformation and Post-Reformation theorists of preaching, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and European theorists of metaphor. The final, sixteenth, chapter is a reflective essay on the question: "Who is actually speaking whenever something is said?"

The work was originally published in Dutch as *Retoriek en Filosofie* (1975). I am not competent to judge the precision of Paul Dunphy's English translation, but the result is everywhere clear and easy to read. A short, selective bibliography cites works representing all major, pertinent viewpoints on the author's subject. The editing is less satisfying. The text is filled with typo-