

Language is Sermonic
for
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In the beginning was the word. The Word transformed chaos to cosmos; introduced order. For the Christian, then, it follows that language is a vehicle of order. For the classically educated Christian, a moment's reflection on the nature of grammar should affirm the truth of such an observation. Language also shapes *sensus communis* because, to quote Richard M. Weaver, "names are indexes to essences." So, Weaver taught, by studying the prevailing "god terms and devil terms" in a given society, one can infer what is most highly regarded and valued in that society. That process of valuation holds significant implications for the classical educator, because the well-ordered soul loves the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.¹ Catechesis, of course, plays a central role in all this. We pray constantly for the Lord to grant us a peaceable and orderly life because, without good order and peace, noise drowns out learning; chaos generates ugliness, which smudges and distorts the lessons of beauty.

Richard M. Weaver was in the habit of pondering just such dilemmas, albeit in a less advanced state of cultural decay. Still, his insights presage the postmodern dilemma. I have written extensively about Weaver's *Visions of Order: the Cultural Crisis of our Time*. I recommend it, and, given the opening paragraph, one would expect that what follows would draw heavily from it. But I am committed elsewhere. About the time he died, Weaver was preparing to publish *Language is Sermonic*. Given the theme of this edition of *The Ninety-Sixth Thesis*, let us briefly consider what Weaver teaches about being a "doctor of culture": Of diagnosing societal ills and suggesting a cure.² Weaver's diagnosis entailed a critique of a project that was "on the march" in his day: General Semantics. We will learn a great deal about language along the way.

Of his critique, Weaver wrote to a friend, "General Semantics is an attempt to exalt pure dialectic at the expense of traditional rhetoric and . . . this is one of the things eating away at the fibre of our society." I love the simplicity with which Weaver identifies the root problem at which he aims. So, what did the General Semanticists teach? And what does Weaver mean by "pure dialectic at the expense of traditional rhetoric"? And what cure did he propose? His critique of the General Semanticists (whose leading scholar was S. I. Hayakawa) teaches much about the nature of language but is also instructive for those of us who would work toward the

¹ See also C.S. Lewis' sketch of "ordinate affections" (i.e., learning to "love what one ought") with its splendid overview of great thinkers on "*ordo amoris*," *Abolition of Man*, 16 & 17.

² In "Rhetoric in Scientistic Sociology," (*Language is Sermonic*, 139-58) Weaver unpacks the language of sociologists to demonstrate how language is a vehicle of order and that words provide "indexes to essences." In other words, the values persons place on things, *when they're not thinking about value propositions*, are discoverable through the words that they grant presumption, the types of arguments they are in the habit of using, and the metaphors on which they habitually rely.

restoration of civil society--for the life of the world--in terms of how one might engage today those whose positions and activities "eat away at the fibre of our society."

The chapter from which the work derives its name, "Language is Sermonic," was initially a lecture, "on a torrid day in July" 1962, at the University of Oklahoma. Here is what he had to say about the decline in status of traditional rhetoric:

When one recalls that a century ago rhetoric was regarded as the most important humanistic discipline taught in our colleges . . . he is forced to see that a great shift of valuation has taken place. In those days, in the not-so-distant Nineteenth Century, to be a professor of rhetoric, one had to be *somebody*. This was a teaching task that was thought to call for ample and varied resources, and it was recognized as addressing itself to the most important of all ends, the persuading of human beings to adopt right attitudes and act in response to them.

Does it really matter that rhetoric's standing in the academy has waned? Insofar as rhetoric contributes to human excellence, a decline in rhetoric, for Weaver, means a decline in humanity, in civility, in goodness. (The reader will recall "men without chests," also from C.S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*.)

Weaver's critique of the General Semanticists spans three essays: "Language is Sermonic," "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric," and "*The Phaedrus* and the Nature of Rhetoric." In the series, he deftly fleshes out those primary truths that constitute the nexus within which rhetorical arts flourish. "They are, in summation, that man is not nor ever can be nor ever should be a depersonalized thinking machine. His feeling is the activity in him most closely related to what used to be called his soul. To appeal to his feeling therefore is . . . a way to honor him, by recognizing him in the fullness of his being."

Language is sermonic because it is a vehicle of valuation. To strip it, as was the Semanticists' aim, of its abstract and evaluative aspects, because of the way language shapes our image of ourselves, will, as Weaver wrote, produce a "denatured speech to suit a denatured man." Weaver predicts that the General Semanticists' project would lead to, "an alteration of man's image of man." In other words, as the status of man, "created in God's image," declines in his own eyes, the need for and importance of rhetorical arts suffer the decline so characteristic of our time.³ So his ultimate criterion is not the status of rhetorical arts, but rather, *the preservation of a proper image of man*. Moving forward, as we take aim at those schools of thought whose positions "eat away at the fibre of *our* society," we should emulate Weaver's *modus operandi*.

³ My CCLE conference presentation, "Making Rhetoric Great Again" ([listen here](#)) was motivated by this author's esteem for Weaver's cultural criticism regarding the dearth of attention to rhetorical arts in his time. Spoiler alert: the discipline has since degenerated . . . significantly.