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THE RHETORICAL THEORIES OF MALEBRANCHE:
PERSUASION THROUGH IMITATION OR ATTENTION?

By THOMAS M. CARR

France’s most prominent philosopher of the second half of the seventeenth century is reputed to be no friend of rhetoric. Bernard Tocanne declares, “C’est chez Malebranche que se mettent en place tous les arguments mis en œuvre par les adversaires de la rhétorique à la fin du siècle,”1 and Peter France calls him “a philosopher who had no love for rhetoric.”2 The basis of such judgments is the Oratorian’s attacks in the Recherche de la vérité (1674) against the use of the imagination and passions in the eloquence of Tertullian, Seneca, and Montaigne. Malebranche’s critique is symptomatic of the legacy of Descartes’ hostility toward rhetoric. The author of the Discours de la méthode had little use for the ancient discipline, scorning the degrees of probability accepted by rhetoricians as proof in favor of the évidence of clear and distinct ideas. Likewise, in theory at least, he saw no need for the rhetorician’s concern for adapting his message to his audience: as Peter France has put it, Descartes’ “first and constant notion of persuasion” is that “he will state the truth firmly and clearly and everyone will agree.”3

However, it is an injustice to limit Malebranche’s views on rhetoric to an amplification of the Cartesian stance. His other intellectual guide was Augustine, whose abandonment of his role as a professional rhetorician upon his conversion, in no way signaled a lack of interest in rhetoric. To be sure, Malebranche condemns what I will call a “rhetoric of imitation,” which appeals to the body, and which is illustrated in its most potent form by “la communication contagieuse des imaginations fortes” (I. 320).4 Yet he also describes a second, more authentic model of persuasion, a “rhetoric of attention” which directs the mind to the Divine Reason in whom men see all truth. He depicts this method in action in dialogues like the Conversations chrétiennes (1677), the Entretiens sur la

2 Peter France, Rhetoric and Truth in France: Descartes to Diderot (Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 29. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis seems to subscribe to the same view. For example in the notes to her recent edition of Malebranche’s Œuvres, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), she remarks à propos a passage in the Conversations chrétiennes that he hesitated to “mettre la psychologie des passions au service d’une rhétorique persuasive” (p. 1765). Her extensive annotations point out a number of sources and parallels to Malebranche’s comments on rhetoric.
3 France, p. 47.
métaphysique et sur la religion (1688), and the Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques (1683). These works, which envisage persuasion taking place under ideal conditions, contain both theoretical discussions of the communication process and practical advice on how to convert the obdurate.

Readers familiar with other major thinkers of the period such as Pascal and Arnauld will recognize points of similarity. I believe they will also sense that, although Malebranche never attempted a comprehensive assessment of the art, his views on rhetoric and persuasion have a unique depth and subtlety due to his success in grounding his rhetorical principles in a coherent analysis of the operation of the mind and its relation to the body. My goal in bringing together his scattered comments on rhetoric is not so much to study the sources of his views as to examine the epistemological and linguistic foundation of the two modes of persuasion he describes. We will see that while Cartesian psycho-physiology furnished much of the rationale for his attacks against “fausse éloquence” (II. 259) of the rhetoric of imitation, his own theory of attention, reinforced by his concept of the Incarnation and the mind’s union with God, made possible the more positive view illustrated in the dialogues.

I

His contrast in the Recherche between the evidence of reason and the verbal beauty of Seneca’s language is representative of his strictures: “Il faut bien distinguer la force & la beauté des paroles, de la force & de l’évidence des raisons. Il y a sans doute beaucoup de force, & quelque beauté dans les paroles de Seneque, mais il y a tres peu de force & d’évidence dans ces raisons. Il donne par la force de son imagination un certain tour à ses paroles, qui touche, qui agite, & qui persuade par impression; mais il ne leur donne pas cette netteté, cette lumiére pure, qui éclaire & qui persuade par évidence . . . En un mot pourvu qu’il parle & qu’il parle bien, il se met peu en peine de ce qu’il dit . . .” (I. 345). By linking eloquence to the body through the imagination and passions Malebranche makes it immediately suspect. This victory of the body over the mind exemplified by the seductive eloquence of Seneca can be analyzed at two levels – in the individual, where it dulls the attention which the mind requires to discover truth, and in its social dimension, where humans are transformed into machines persuading one another mechanically.

In the individual, Malebranche locates the source of false eloquence in the perversion caused by original sin of the proper relationship between the body and the mind’s two chief faculties, the understanding and the will. According to his version of Cartesian psycho-physiology, both the passions and sense perceptions depend on bodily functions, and their legitimate role is limited to activating the mind in the interest of the body. The senses provide information to the understanding about the relation of objects in the material world to the body, warning of dangers and identifying potential benefits, while the passions excite the will to action for the good of the body. Before the Fall of Adam, the senses and passions were content with just this minimal role, leaving the mind free to pursue its union with God (III. 72–73), but original sin has altered this relation between mind and body. The mind’s previous control has become a state of dependence, and the passions and sense perceptions now overstep their bounds and lead the mind into precipitous judgments and thus error.
The passions pose a special danger to the will’s double task of suspending the judgment and focusing the attention until the overwhelming certainty of clear and distinct ideas is achieved. Ever since the Fall, the passions have had such a strong attraction on the will that they can take hold of it, upsetting its concentration. Style itself can act as just such a pander. Malebranche’s example shows how insidious this appeal to the passions can be, for he cites not the impassioned eloquence of some demagogue, but the affected negligence, the “air cavalier” (I. 359) of Montaigne: “la manière d’écrire de cet Auteur n’étant agréable, que parce qu’elle nous touche, & qu’elle réveille nos passions d’une manière imperceptible” (I. 360). In fact, the force of all the levels of style depends in the last analysis on their appeal to our fallen nature: “tous les divers stiles ne nous plaisent ordinairement, qu’à cause de la corruption secrète de notre coeur” (I. 360). Thus whether it is the sublime style which flatters our love of grandeur, or a delicate effeminate one which appeals to our desire for sensual pleasure, the will is deflected by passion from its pursuit of truth (I. 360–361).

The interference of sense perceptions with the proper functioning of the understanding is the basis of Malebranche’s famous description in Book II of the Recherche of the dangers of imaginative eloquence. When objects in the material world are perceived, a flow of animal spirits registers the data from the senses as tiny grooves in the brain. The imagination is the faculty of the understanding by which these grooves are reactivated, forming mental pictures of the absent object. Unfortunately, any such ideas in the imagination are only idées sensibles, and suffer from the limitations of all sense perceptions, that is, they are hazy and incomplete. Alone they are unable to provide any true knowledge of the objects in themselves, and can at best inform about the relation of such objects to the body. Only a second faculty of the understanding, the pure understanding, can go beyond this rudimentary level of experience necessary for the conservation of the body to an appreciation of things in themselves. Yet because such clear ideas are not related to any mental image they are more abstract, and the will must strain to maintain attention on them; all too often it prefers to remain at the level of the more attractive sense ideas. Thus, just as impassioned eloquence, or even the “air cavalier” of Montaigne can overpower the will, rhetorical appeals to the imagination dazzle the understanding. In both cases the mind’s attention is the victim, and the body alone, the machine in Cartesian parlance, is persuaded.

Malebranche situates this mechanical persuasion in a social context where men communicate chiefly at the level of the body. He pictures society as an assemblage of living machines, each setting the others in motion by a process of imitation. “C’est beaucoup plus le hazard que la Raison qui le conduit. Tous vivent d’opinion. Tous agissent par imitation” (XII–XIII. 128). This communication is mechanical in that it takes place unconsciously at the level of the body. It propagates opinion rather than truth because it operates uncritically without the intervention of reason. Its physiological basis is a common disposition in the brain which leads men to model themselves on each other: “Ces liens naturels, qui nous sont communs avec les bêtes, consistent dans une certaine disposition du cerveau qu’ont tous les hommes, pour imiter quelques-uns de ceux avec lesquels il conversent, pour former les mêmes jugements qu’ils font, & pour entrer dans les mêmes passions dont ils sont agités” (I. 321). Humans have been endowed with this
tendency to facilitate the conservation of civil society, just as God has given the senses and passions for the preservation of the body. But the Fall left this union of men's bodies to each other stronger than the mutual union of their minds with God. The result is the false eloquence of imitation which treats men as mindless automatons, incapable of reflection.

Malebranche depicts this imitation in action in a variety of situations. For example, the desire to please among friends of equal rank leads them to accept each other's opinions without reflection. Developing the mechanical analogy, he compares them to lutes so perfectly tuned that when a chord is struck on one, the other sounds automatically (XI. 205). This tendency to imitate others uncritically is even more irresistible in the case of superiors who are the natural object of respect. The success of English and German rulers in establishing national churches during the Reformation can be attributed to just this imitation by subjects of their monarch (I. 334–335). An entire chapter of the Recherche is filled with similar examples from all stations of life of this "force de l'imagination" (I. 331–340).

The most remarkable instance of this mechanical persuasion is Malebranche's analysis of "la communication contagieuse des imaginations fortes" (I. 320ff.), usually the centerpiece of any discussion of his rhetoric. It illustrates perfectly the mechanical dimension of the rhetoric of imitation, based as it is on the disposition of the brains of men with weak imaginations to "recevoir machinalement l'impression de l'image qui les agite (I. 329). Such a weak imagination is activated by a strong one, a man who possesses "cette constitution du cerveau, qui le rend capable de vestiges & de traces extrêmement profondes, & qui remplissent tellement la capacité de l'âme, qu'elles l'empêchent d'apporter quelque attention à d'autres choses, qu'à celles que ces images représentent" (I. 323). The persuasive power of such a man does not lie in an intellectual mastery of his topic, for indeed, the vivid images produced by his imagination make him incapable of grasping pure ideas. The least intellectual of the five divisions of rhetoric — memory and delivery — will stand him in good stead; he has only to deliver with vigor a speech written by another. His power stems quite simply from his ability to transfer the vivid impressions produced by the agitation of animal spirits in his brain to those of his listeners, and for this he has no need of the rules of rhetoric: "quoique sa rhétorique soit souvent irrégulière, elle ne laisse pas d'être très-persuasive" (I. 329).

The violence of Malebranche's denunciations of strong imaginations can best be understood when we see how their eloquence perverts both language and the whole communication process. Words exist, according to the Oratorian, to communicate thoughts, the intellectual ideas of the pure understanding: "les mots ne sont inventez que pour exprimer les pensées" (XI. 95). However, in the rhetoric of imitation the words of a strong imagination do not persuade so much as his delivery. Gestures, animation, and tone of voice carry the principal burden of persuasion. More effective than words alone, this body language forms a natural language understood by all men. Facial

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expressions, body movements and the like convey a universal meaning across cultural boundaries, while the sign and meaning of a word in any given language are joined together by convention. “Certinement la parole toute seule est un signe équivoque & trompeur dans la bouche de la pluspart des hommes. De plus comme elle est d'institution arbitraire, elle ne persuade pas vivement les verités qu'elle exprime… Mais l'air & les manières sont un langage naturel, qui se fait entendre sans qu’on y pense, qui persuade par une vive impression, & qui répand pour ainsi dire la conviction dans les esprits” (XI. 255). Body language is thus at once less equivocal and more vivid than verbal communication, with the result that it persuades more readily, requiring less attention.

Even when the words uttered by a strong imagination, rather than his delivery alone, have persuasive force, they are effective not as signifiers of pure ideas, but because of the mental images they evoke or because of the charm of their rhythm and harmony. In Malebranche’s eyes, verbal language suffers from the same dualism which haunts human beings, for the sound and meaning of a word are joined together arbitrarily, just as are the body and the mind. The mechanical persuasion of strong imaginations succeeds when the sensual aspect of language wins out over the sensual element in man. So potent is this appeal to the senses that even though Tertullian, Seneca, and Montaigne lack the advantage of oral delivery, their words on the printed page have a hypnotic effect, stronger than the reason of many of their readers: “Leurs paroles toutes mortes qu’elles sont, ont plus de vigueur que la raison de certaines gens. Elles entrent, elles pénètrent, elles dominent dans l’âme d’une manière si impérieuse, qu’elles se font obéir sans se faire entendre” (I. 341).

This perversion of language is so extensive that in extreme cases the words convey no meaning, only the feeling of persuasion: “on se rend à leurs ordres sans les sçavoir. On veut croire mais on ne sçait que croire: car lorsqu’on veut sçavoir précisément ce qu’on croit, ou ce qu’on veut croire; & qu’on s’approche, pour ainsi dire, de ces fantômes pour les reconnoître, ils s’en vont souvent en fumée avec tout leur appareil & tout leur éclat” (I. 341). The rhetoric of imitation produces conviction without content. It represents the ultimate example of the misuse of language prevalent in ordinary discourse, where “les paroles, dont le principal usage devroit être de représenter les idées pures de l’esprit, ne servent d’ordinaire qu’à exprimer des idées sensibles, & les mouvemens de l’ame” (XI. 136).

II

The temptation to resort to these appeals to the body is so pervasive that a rhetoric addressed to the mind might seem impossible. Even in the Entretiens, Ariste wonders out loud if Malebranche’s mouthpiece Theodore is not guilty of just such a misuse of language: “Vôtre exhortation, Theodore, me paroît bien vive pour un entretien de Métaphysique. Il me semble que vous excitez en moi des sentimens, au lieu d’y faire naître des idées claires” (XII—XIII. 69). Ariste fears the onset of the uncritical feeling of persuasion produced by the rhetoric of imitation. The first part of Theodore’s defense seems to deny the possibility of any rhetoric at all. “Je vous dis ce que je voi, & vous ne le voïez pas. C’est une preuve que l’homme n’instruit pas l’homme . . . Je parle à vos oreil-
les. Apparemment, je n'y fait que trop de bruit.” Is meaningful communication through language above the level of the senses being denied? Not quite, for Theodore further explains that, while he is not Ariste’s maître, he is at least his moniteur. If Ariste is not yet convinced, it is because “nôtre unique Maître ne parle point encore assez clairement à vôtre esprit: ou plutôt la Raison lui parle sans cesse fort nettement; mais faute d'attention, vous n'entendez point assez ce qu'elle vous répond.” A rhetoric appealing to the mind may be possible after all, if it takes into account the role of attention, the prodding of the moniteur, and and the action of the Maître intérieur or Universal Reason.

If Descartes had been Malebranche’s sole moniteur it is unlikely he would have envisaged such a reformed rhetoric. As we have seen, the Oratorian’s distrust of mechanical persuasion found its inspiration in the Cartesian explanation of the body/mind relationship. Yet Malebranche found Descartes’ view of this union to be radically deficient. The first lines of the preface of the Recherche point to a union he considered much more crucial— that of the mind with God. Although this union is more intimate and more essential than the mind’s union with the body, Adam’s Fall has weakened both the union itself and our awareness of it (I. 11). In addition, just as original sin weakened the mind’s union with God, it shifted the previous equilibrium between the mind and body in favor of the body. For Malebranche, the mind is situated between matter and its true goal God, with the balance in favor of the body since the Fall. The stakes are far from merely epistemological; man’s salvation is also in question: “L’esprit devient plus pur, plus lumineux, plus fort & plus étendu à proportion que s’augmente l’union qu’il a avec Dieu; parce que c’est elle qui fait toute sa perfection. Au contraire il se corrompt, il s’aveugle, il s’affoiblit, & il se resserre à mesure que l’union qu’il a avec son corps s’augmente & se fortifie; parce que cette union fait aussi toute son imperfection” (I. 15–16).

Given this perspective, rhetoric is not just the rather futile instrument that it was for Descartes who was much more interested in his philosophic method; in Malebranche’s eyes, a rhetoric of imitation separates man from God: witness the vain stoicism of a Seneca or the worldly Pyrrhonism of a Montaigne.

Malebranche’s more positive views on persuasion depend on his theory of the union of the mind with God, and it was to Augustine that he turned for inspiration here, not so much to the Augustine of rhetorical treatises like the fourth book of De Doctrina christiana, but to philosophic texts like De Magistro. If we examine the Oratorian’s rhetoric in terms of epistemology it might be called a rhetoric of attention; if we approach it from a religious perspective it is a rhetoric of the Incarnation. Both are opposite sides of the same coin.

Detailed comparisons of Malebranche’s views with those of his contemporaries are beyond the scope of this article. Two brief examples, however, will illustrate what I believe to be his depth and subtlety. His perennial opponent Antoine Arnauld cites the Incarnation in his Réflexions sur l’éloquence in order to justify the use of the sensible in sermons (Œuvres, XLII, Paris: Sigismond D’Arnay, 1781, 385–386), but more to show that we need the imagination to envisage dogmas like the Incarnation than, as Malebranche does, to provide a rationale for using the sensible to illuminate the intelligible. One of his disciples, Bernard Lamy, includes a chapter in his Art de parler on the need to excite attention (Amsterdam: Paul Marrey, 1699, pp. 324–325), but his comments are somewhat banal ones about the necessity of holding the interest of the audience, rather than being grounded in a theory such as vision in God.
Malebranche is quite capable of using the word attention in a conventional manner, as when he confesses to having discussed Tertullian and the others because he expected that their famous names “seroient capables d’exciter l’attention des Lecteurs” (III. 119). Usually, however, the term includes a technical meaning, so pivotal that Pierre Blanchard has identified it as the central element in the Oratorian’s thought. For Malebranche, attention is more than just the intense application of the mind to the problem at hand which Descartes described in the ninth rule of the _Regulae_. Malebranche calls attention “une prière naturelle, par laquelle nous obtenons, que la Raison nous éclaire” (XI. 60). Each time the attention is focused, the mind is in effect addressing God to whom it is attached and in whom all truth is seen. An act of attention is a kind of unconscious prayer that God will enlighten the mind. Without it no natural truth can be known.

Attention is no easy thing to maintain. It is “ce combat de l’esprit contre les impressions du corps” (XII-XIII. 32). It requires both sustained intellectual concentration in the face of distractions offered by the body and the refusal to accept all the commonly held notions about the world of experience which do not hold up under attentive examination. The rhetoric of imitation settles for just such opinions when the exhausted mind takes refuge in the probable, instead of pursuing the _évidence_ which is the sign of truth (XI. 21).

If the fraility of human attention is a consequence of original sin (XII.-XIII. 76), the Incarnation is the divine response. The _Raison universelle_, the _Maître intérieur_, to whom acts of attention are addressed is the Logos of John’s gospel. Realizing that man in his fallen state could never attain all the truth of which he was capable by his attention alone, the Logos became incarnate. “La Raison ne s’est incarnée que pour conduire par les sens les hommes à la Raison” (XI. 35). The _Conversations chrétiennes_ cite Christ’s use of miracles, parables, and “comparaisons familières” (IV. 112) as examples of this instruction through the senses. Although numerous texts show the Incarnation itself to be a rhetorical act, as God’s way of using the senses to draw man’s attention to higher truth, the most explicit passage goes on to present the Incarnation as the model for human eloquence: “Je dis qu’il faut exposer aux autres la vérité, comme la vérité même s’est exposée. Les hommes depuis le péché de leur père, ayant la vûë trop foible pour considérer la vérité en elle-même, cette souveraine vérité s’est rendu sensible en se couvrant de nôtre humanité, afin d’attirer nos regards, de nous éclairer, & de se rendre aimable à nos yeux. Ainsi on peut à son exemple couvrir de quelque chose de sensible les véritez que nous voulons comprendre & enseigner aux autres, afin d’arrêter l’esprit qui aime le sensible, & qui ne se prend aïsement que par quelque chose qui flatte les sens. La Sagesse éternelle s’est rendu sensible, mais non dans l’éclat: elle s’est rendu sensible, non pour nous arrêter au sensible, mais pour nous élever à l’intelligible” (II. 260–261). I will center my discussion of the rhetoric of attention around three points illustrated in this passage. First, the Incarnation justifies taking into account the position and psychology of the audience; second, it authorizes the use of the senses and passions

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9 On the Incarnation as a rhetorical act, see III. 146–147; IV. 112; XII–XIII. 121.
which had been so decried in the rhetoric of imitation; yet, finally, the limits and dangers of the sensible are never forgotten.

Malebranche’s conviction that there is only one *Raison universelle* speaking with a single voice to all who will listen does not prevent a keen appreciation of the need to adapt to each particular audience. Just as God accommodated himself to man by taking on a body, so proofs must be chosen which are acceptable to each audience: “il est permis à la Chine de tirer de Confucius Philosophe du Pais des preuves de la vérité de nos Dogmes . . . pour persuader promptement les gens, il faut necessairement leur parler selon leurs idées, un langage qu’ils entendent bien, et qu’ils écoutent volontiers” (IV. 4). Malebranche recommends as a first step familiarizing oneself with the audience, “Avant que de parler tâche de connoître la force et la capacité de ceux qui t’écoutent’” (X. 204), and he offers a series of hints on psychological strategies to use with a variety of audiences: those disposed to truth (X. 205); *esprits forts* (XI. 39), with whom equivocal terms should be avoided; and heretics, who must be taught to distrust their own judgment (I. 396).

The dialogues themselves illustrate how to deal with an audience which manifests “un fort grand amour de la vérité” (X. 205). One can expose one’s thoughts directly, no matter how abstract the principles may be: “leur amour de la vérité leur donnera l’attention, & l’attention fera naitre en eux la lumière” (X. 205). Yet persuasion is seldom this easy. In all three dialogues, once the willing learner has mastered the fundamentals of Malebranche’s system, the discussion turns to how to convert others. With those who have only “quelque amour pour la vérité” (X. 205) or who are even scoffers, different tactics are in order. “Interroge, mais en Disciple, afin que l’amour propre renouvelle & fortifie l’attention. Approuve ce qu’il y a de bon dans les réponses qu’on te rend, sans faire d’abord attention au reste. Découvre la vérité de manière qu’on s’imagine soi-même la découvrir, fais en sorte qu’avec toi tout le monde ait de l’esprit. Attribuë aux autres des pensées solides, qu’ils n’expriment qu’à demi, & qu’ils n’ont peut-être pas. Afin que l’homme aime la vérité, il faut qu’elle lui appartienne, & qu’elle le touche: il faut la regarder comme une production de son esprit” (X. 205). Malebranche acknowledges the element of manipulation here, calling it elsewhere, a “charitable dissimulation” (XII–XIII. 317). He goes so far as to suggest playing the devil’s advocate: “Mais lorsque vous aurez reconnu que la vérité les pénètre, alors combattez-la sans craindre qu’ils l’abandonnent. Ils la regarderont comme un bien qui leur appartient” (XII–XIII. 317). He shows no qualms about using *ad hominem* arguments which he himself finds weak: “On peut même, pour persuader une vérité constante, se servir d’une preuve très foible, lorsque ceux qu’on veut instruire, la trouvent bonne; & qu’elle est convaincante pour eux, qu’une autre seroit démonstrative, s’ils pouvoient en comprendre la force” (XVI. 155–156). In such cases audience adaptation is clearly not grounded in respect for the other’s position. Instead it means accommodating oneself to a perceived weakness, and Malebranche justifies any deception by comparing himself to a doctor treating a self-indulgent patient: “lors que un malade aime son mal, il faut le tromper pour le guérir” (X. 204).

Just the same, in the context of the theory of vision in God, the deception implied in a recommendation like “il faut toujours . . . les (the others) instruire en sorte qu’ils s’ima-
ginent nous régenter” (IV. 58) is less manipulative than it might seem. Neither participant is a true teacher, for as we have seen, “l’homme n’instruit pas l’homme.” They are not maîtres but moniteurs, who serve to excite the attention to the true Maître intérieur, the sole source of truth. In the final analysis, each person must discover truth for himself by focusing his attention on the common source of Divine Wisdom.

If the Incarnation is a rhetorical act using the sensible to make known the intelligible, it justifies the use of sense perceptions and the passions, either to strengthen the attention, or to fortify the will’s resolve to do good. Malebranche in fact devotes several chapters in the fifth book of the Recherche to showing how the senses and passions can remedy our limited capacity for attention to pure ideas. He does, however, take care to recommend the least addictive of these remedies. He suggests the imagination, which as the perception of absent objects does not engage the understanding so deeply as direct sense perception (II. 262), and admiration, which of all the passions affects the heart the least (II. 204).

The examples in the Recherche, like diagrams in geometry or the passion for learning among scholars, deal with the discovery of truth more than its communication, with science more than rhetoric. Just the same, he took care to note that the sensible does have a legitimate role in a major arena of seventeenth-century eloquence, questions of morals or religion. In an important addition, published in 1678 in the ninth éclaircissement to the Recherche, he reaffirms his attack on what he considered false eloquence, while adding a crucial concession. Noting that Tertullian, for all his stylistic excess, was wise not to write like a geometer, he says, “Les figures qui expriment nos sentiments & nos mouvements, à l’égard des vérités que nous exposons aux autres, sont absolument nécessaires. Et je crois que principalement dans les discours de Religion & de Morale, l’on doit se servir d’ornemens qui fassent rendre à la vérité tout le respect qui lui est dû, & de mouvements qui agitent l’âme & la portent à des actions vertueuses” (III. 126). Just the same, he is none too specific about recommending technical devices to this end. Here the broad category of “ornemens” can probably be identified with the whole range of tropes appealing to the imagination. His own use of similes to clarify abstract concepts in his philosophy comes to mind—for example, the comparison of the mind to a ball of wax to explain how pure and sensible ideas modify it, or the image of rain falling on both fields and uncultivated areas to illustrate the distribution of grace to the just and unjust. His reference to “figures” refers to the affective elements of persuasion, especially to the figures of speech, which contemporary rhetorical theory considered expressive of the emotions. Comments elsewhere make clear he had in mind a sort of ethical proof, in which the speaker communicates his own emotional reaction to his message by stirring up in himself the emotions he wishes to impart to his audience: “Excite donc d’abord en toi-même les mouvements que la vérité y doit faire naître, & expose ensuite tes sentiments sans te contraindre. Il faut que tu sois pénétré pour toucher les autres” (X. 205).

Finally, the Incarnation indicates the limits of emotional and imaginative persuasion, which must be used with prudence so as not to distract the soul from its true goal. Just as Christ chose to appear sans éclat, eloquence should not so dazzle the mind that higher truth is forgotten (II. 261). Almost every passage in which Malebranche counsels the passions or imagination as aids to attention also contains a caveat against being carried
away by them. His fear of mechanical persuasion tempers every passage favorable to traditional rhetoric. For example, despite its approval of appeals to the emotions, the ninth éclaircissement ends with a double warning to both speaker and audience: “Il ne faut pas convaincre ni se laisser convaincre sans sçavoir évidemment, distinctement, précisément de quoi on convainc, ou de quoi on est convaincu” (III. 126). The emotions can only be a supplement to rational proof, never a substitute.

In this rhetoric of attention, the sensual appeal of language, which dominated in the rhetoric of imitation, no longer is the chief agent of persuasion. Since a word’s sound is only an arbitrary sign for Malebranche, it can lead to truth only in so far as it directs the attention to the Maître intérieur. As Ariste indicated in the Entretiens, he is not persuaded by what Theodore has said, but by the testimony of interior truth. “Oui, maintenant je suis convaincu, non par la force de vos discours, mais par les réponses évidentes de la vérité intérieure” (XII–XIII. 88). For those who know how to consult this inner voice there is no need to spell out every argument word for word, “Ceux qui rentrent dans eux-mêmes pour y écouter la vérité intérieure, et pour étudier les lois éternelles, comprennent à demi mot des choses qui paroissent incompréhensibles aux autres hommes” (XVII, part 1, 413). At the point where evidence is finally achieved language becomes irrevelant.10 Pierre Blanchard points out that the attention by which certainty is obtained is only a first step, “un premier contact avec la vérité, contact toujours, précaire et fragile qui s’intériorise en réflexion” (p. 27). This évidence must be further internalized by reflection and meditation where language plays an even more reduced role. In the dialogues Ariste does not profess to be persuaded immediately upon hearing Theodore’s arguments, but only after having a full day to reflect on them and to consult the Maître intérieur. Language has become a prelude to silence in true Augustinian fashion.11

This is not the least of the paradoxes found in Malebranche’s views on rhetoric and persuasion. On the one hand, his adherence to the Cartesian ideal of the overwhelming évidence of clear and distinct ideas would seem to eliminate all need for rhetoric. At the most one might expect the limited rhetoric of a moniteur who aids others to focus their attention, free from the distractions of the senses and passions. Such a modest role might be possible with an audience composed of the intellectual elite found in the Entretiens of the likes of Ariste, who is relatively free of prejudice, the passions, and other marks of concupiscence which restrict the capacity for attention; yet in real life, one is seldom faced with such an ideal audience, and Malebranche accepts that the moniteur must become a rhetor, using the senses, the passions, amour-propre, and even strategies some might call sophistic, to strengthen the attention, at least up to the point at which the dispassionate consultation of the Maître intérieur can begin.

Unfortunately, the dividing line between the legitimate rhetorical use of the senses and false eloquence is hazy. Clearly, false eloquence is the use of rhetorical devices in the service of error, but is it not as well for Malebranche any discourse on behalf of truth

10 Robinet, p. 165.
which persuades the body rather than the mind, which settles for sensible persuasion rather than évidence? Yet, since évidence has a personal, subjective dimension, can the monitor/rhetor ever be entirely sure that the persuasion he obtains is grounded in intellectual assent rather than merely in the senses? It was just this unresolved tension in Malebranche's comments on persuasion which led some of his disciples like François Lamy to elaborate the Oratorian's attack on false eloquence into a condemnation of rhetoric, while others like Henri Lelevel and Bernard Lamy defended and taught it.¹²

The existence of such tensions should not obscure the fact that the implications for rhetoric of Malebranche's system are not as negative as have been supposed. To be sure, he had little interest in the rules of the art as it was taught in his day, and he scarcely ever alludes to the traditional categories and apparatus. Yet he was vitally interested with persuasion both as a philosopher and a Christian, and he deals with fundamental concerns of rhetoricians, such as the recognition of the need for strategies determined by the audience's psychology and beliefs, and for ethical and emotional proofs as well as reasoned ones. Moreover, these concerns find a theoretical rationale in a concept central to his thought, the Incarnation - a doctrine with epistemological as well as religious implications for him. The fact that the Maître intérieur, the Raison universelle, became flesh legitimates the rhetorical use of the sensible to reach the intelligible. Finally, his analysis of the rhetoric of imitation with its emphasis on automatic responses is rich with insights into techniques of nonverbal suggestion and unconscious persuasion.

Like Plato, who also has a reputation for an aversion to rhetoric, Malebranche tempered much of his hostility. Unfortunately, this more positive attitude has been neglected because the Oratorian never saw fit to give prominence to his views in his own Phaedrus, combining his Cartesian and Augustinian heritage.