

# ETHICS OF POLEMIC. ORATORICAL DUELS

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ABSTRACT. Our study is devoted to a relevant matter related to the theory and art of persuasive speaking in a broader sense (dialogue, talk, discourse), which has proved its usefulness throughout centuries – from the ancient times until contemporary oratoric activities. Polemic represents a confrontation on the level of various (contradictory) ideas, statements and opinions regarding certain issues under consideration.

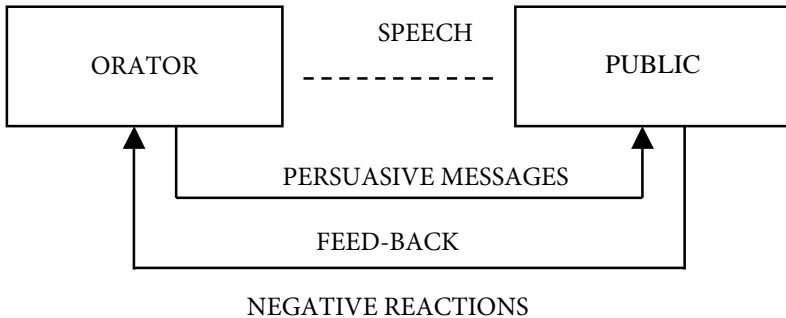
The author focused on *the ethics of rhetoric*, by an interpretative analysis of the requirements of a civilized and decent *fight* among arguments/counter-arguments. *Inter alia*, the semantic parameters of a correct moral behavior are envisaged, leading to the conclusion that the language has a significant influence on the quality and the effectiveness of any polemical exercise. Whether is carried on in an ethical manner (which means: mutual respect of arguments; avoidance of a radical or offensive expressions; joint preoccupation towards identifying acceptable solutions and compromises, etc.), *the “war of words”* could become a *win-to-win process*: the *sui-generis* victory belongs to both subjects involved into a verbal dispute.

A series of “oratoric duels” are presented in our article such as: Demosthenes – Eschine; Barbu Ștefănescu-Delavrancea – the calumniator of Caragiale, Caion; Mihail Kogălniceanu – Barbu Catargiu; Nicolae Titulescu – Count Albert Apponyi. Each of the above-mentioned examples

indicates the importance of the ethical values and standards in all polemical situations.

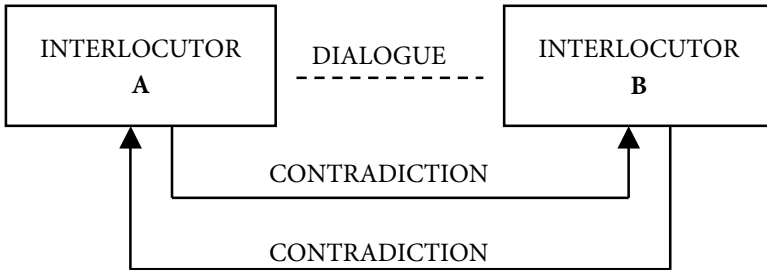
By its deep essence and significance, every oratorical exercise is aimed to persuade, through an eloquent language and thus to “peacefully” impose a certain point of view, assessment or conclusion. This is mainly the situation when an orator delivers a speech in front of an audience; of course, since the respective public is not a passive or neutral factor, there is always a possibility for *feed-back* from the public to the speaker (reactions, questions, comments, different or even contradictory positions/statements). But, in our interpretation, such situations, which are normal for the dynamics of a discourse, do not belong *stricto sensu* to the zone of polemic representing in general terms a “fight” between two interlocutors (as factors of a contradictory dialogue). The above-mentioned remarks could be embodied in the following schemes, just for a better understanding:

*Scheme I*



Usually, the *feed-back*, even having a polemical profile, is just a temporary phase, for a short period of time, being finally overcome by a genuine and talented orator, in his advantage (of course, the public – as a singular person or as a whole – understands and accepts this fact).

## Scheme II



One could say that each of the interlocutors has an equally symmetrical posture in terms of delivering contradictory messages, assessments and conclusions, with a view to gain “the victory in the battle of arguments”. Regarding time-parameters, there is no discrimination between interlocutor A and interlocutor B (as we have mentioned in the *Scheme I*, where the public – individually or generically conceived – has less time *versus* the orator). *Scheme II* represents, of course in a synthetical format, a *polemic*. Various dictionaries (e.g. “*Collins New Gem Dictionary*”, edited by Ernest Weekley) offer the following definition for polemic: “a war of words”. In principle, this explanation, preserving the Greek ancient meaning of the concept, could be accepted, because indicates, through a very short expression, an universal feature of any polemical situation, which often occurs in the dialogues, public debates (such as *TV talk-shows*) or in the daily conversations (of course, at a level which does not require a very sophisticated background).

It goes without saying that an orator, especially in those cases of judiciary nature, should have a permanent awareness of fight, of confrontation and controversy.

For instance, Quintilian, in his basic work entitled “*Institutio Oratoria*”, compares the orator with a military commander who is obliged to lead his troops not only over “pleasant fields”, but, in many situations, through difficult mountainous areas, for

conquering at the end some fortresses located on steep cliffs or having strong fortifications. An orator is very often obliged to fight against the enemy “on an open field”, for the satisfaction of the assistance; when he is obliged to penetrate to the thorny field of juridical matters or to look for the truth, in its “hiding places”, he will not hesitate at all, but neither he will not just utilize smart and glittering thoughts; the orator will prefer, on the contrary, to continue firmly the war by fortification works, traps and secret methods (all of them offered by the art of rhetoric). (Quintilian – *Arta oratorică*, vol. I–III, Editura Minerva, București, 1974)

Coming back to Quintilian's teachings, we mention the following: it would be good if the plans of orator would remain in a mental “hiding place”, unknown to the enemy; “every stratagem, if is discovered, cannot have effectiveness”. In the same spirit, Marc Antonius formulated a specific recommendation for concealing the eloquence, when there is such a need, in order to ensure more credibility for the orators and to make less impressionable the snares arranged by lawyers.

“War” in polemic could have two main forms: *i) war of arguments; ii) war of linguistic expressions/words.*

The first form regards the level of logical demonstration and therefore the person (speaking person) having the strongest proofs will become the winner. Public assisting to the confrontation will be able to make an intimate, undeclared comparison between those who are engaged in the “*war of arguments*” and finally it will react accordingly, i.e. with feelings of admiration towards the winner and feelings of compassion for the defeated speaker. Always, a polemic has an outcome, but such an end is not in every situation recognized by the defeated interlocutor (“verbal fighter”). Anyhow, the dispute could offer certain lessons to the audience, especially when the mutual arguments are quite close to each other in terms of persuasive power.

The second form, *war of language*, has an inferior degree of epistemic profoundness. But it is obvious that a lack of arguments could be fully and successfully replaced by the “*offensive of words*”,

which perhaps could have just a *hic et nunc* (here and now) effect. In the practice of dialogue and debate there are several situations in which a defeated interlocutor/speaker tries to get “refuge” in the zone of shocking or deceptive expressions. Without a rigorous self-control, the “*war of language*” could be easily transferred to the level of invectives and offending sentences, where the moral rules of polemic do not function any longer. On the other hand, the audience *per se* would be in a position to set-up its own opinions not only concerning the topic of the controversial discussion, but also the attitude, behavior and ethical profile of those people involved in the given rhetorical exercise.

Quintilian again emphasizes that, namely in the judiciary practice, there are certain orators who, pleading for a cause which is less compatible with the eloquence, try “*to stuff*” their speeches with several circumstances from outside that cause. But assuming a task to speak in bad and dirty words means – as Appius said – “*a dog’s eloquence*” (a euphemistic expression indicating, of course, a behavior not belonging to the human beings, but to the animals). In “*Institutio Oratoria*”, Quintilian categorically rejects any behavior of this kind, considered as “a base, degrading, undignified delight” which might be unpleasant for all “honest listeners”. Those people who proceed in this incorrect manner have to expect to be treated by others in a similar way. Pericles used to say that he would like that no words offending his people come sometimes to his mind. What Pericles said about himself is applied by Quintilian to all potential orators: “the word that seemed to be courageous, when you pronounced it, has to be considered as a stupidity, if the given word hurt somebody”.

In Romanian old spiritual space, Anton Pann stated the following: “Often, the tongue cuts more than the sword”. Back in our history, in the famous work entitled “*Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son, Teodosie*”, we find the following advice: “If you spoke earlier by abstemious and laudable words, but later on you mixed to them stupid chatter, you damaged all of them and by this you made those words useless”.

It is well known that dispute and polemic are frequent in the diplomatic area. As a matter of fact, we have in mind the open “*struggle*” not purely between individual human entities or between opponent “armies”, but between providers of arguments, bearers and promoters of messages, who are placed in a relationship of contradiction. Finally, from this dispute on theoretical and interpretative level, someone will be victorious, generating respect, appreciation and support from the listeners. But – what is also very important – the defeated factor of the given dispute will receive from the audience full respect and esteem, particularly when the “*rhetorical fight*” was difficult and for a long time. The positive approach of the audience is determined, above all, by the “cleanness” of the means, mainly based upon solid arguments, civilized language and respect for the views of the enemy *sui-generis*.

We will introduce in this context a few examples taken from the diplomatic rhetoric of Nicolae Titulescu, owner of two subsequent mandates (exceptionally) in his capacity as the President of League of Nations in Geneva. For a presentation *in extenso* of this subject, our books “*Diplomația Cuvintelor*” (2001) (*Diplomacy of Words*) and “*Focul sacru al Genevei*” (2002) (*Sacred Fire of Geneva*) are recommended. For Titulescu, “*courtesy is the law's ally*”. But, on the other hand, the same outstanding statesman and diplomat is obliged to recognize with obvious bitterness that such a mutual behavior of opponents during a dialogue (in the broad sense of this concept) was deteriorated during the last years of his prodigious activity: “... it seems to me that this divorce (between courtesy and law) is total. Moreover, in the absence of these two elements, nature which does not tolerate the empty space (*vacuum*) had to substitute them. Nowadays, I see that, instead of those elements, *wanton allegation* and *provocation* reign, as almighty elements. I confess to you that I am astonished and afflicted”.

Thinking in positive and constructive terms, Titulescu made the following confession: “Conference table represents for me what means a grass field for a racing horse!” This metaphor is able to express the vision of Romanian orator – diplomat about the genuine

open competition, on the basis of a series of rules and requirements, mutually accepted and implemented. A full-fledged *Olympic spirit of competition* should be always envisaged, taking into account several basic values, *inter alia*: correctness, mutual esteem, trust in own capacities, respect for the opponent's abilities, acceptance of compromise, rejection of preconceived ideas or aggressive language.

It is to be recalled for instance the attitude of Titulescu, when the Emperor of Ethiopia, delivering his speech in the conference hall of Geneva's League of Nations, was in a brutish manner interrupted by some journalists. At that emotional and difficult moment, Titulescu went to the middle of the auditorium, saying the following words: "Mr. President, on behalf of justice, I ask you to intervene for stopping such acts!" (Nicolae Titulescu – *Discursuri*, Editura Științifică, București, 1967). Later on, Titulescu expressed in a categorical way his opinions regarding the ethics of confrontations of verbal nature: "... whether the League of Nations, after it denies own principles, does not remain at least a club where the rules of gentlemen are observed, it would be better that such organization be dissolved immediately".

The long history of rhetoric as a science and a art of effective and persuasive speaking provides a lot of "*oratoric duels*" which represent solid models of polemic, due to their specific strategies (defense or/and attack), spontaneousness of answers, elegant and smart formulas of overcoming difficult situations, subtle allusions, prompt and original abilities of shunning etc. Synthetically, we will present below a few ancient and modern examples:

#### a) **Demosthenes – Eschine**

The conquest and destruction of Olint by Macedonian King Philip (in the year 348 B.C.) generated concern and deep indignation all over Greece. After several attempts of using this state of spirit for creating a broad trend against Macedonia, the Athenians preferred another strategy, namely that of delegating, in Macedonia "*an embassy*" (original term used in the ancient speeches, having the meaning of "*mission of good-will*"), composed

of Demosthenes and Eschine. However, the good-will of Macedonian King proved to be not sincere and lasting, but just dictated by certain concrete circumstances. This is why Athenians decided to send once again the same mission, for receiving, if possible, the oath of Philip and his allies; but the second approach has no real and meaningful results. After coming back, a conflict starts between Demosthenes and Eschine with regard to the proposal put forward by Philocrates, in the *People's Assembly*, to convey thanks to the Macedonian King:

- Demosthenes, denouncing in front of the *Council of Five Hundreds* the genuine plans of Philip, accuses Eschine of betrayal because he presented to the Athenians only hopes without any real perspective of being put into practice.

- On his turn, Eschine rejects the Demosthenes' allegations, by presenting a lot of facts situated outside the cause and thus ignoring the most serious accusations. (Demostene, Eschine, Hiperide, Licurg – *Pagini alese din oratorii greci*, vol. II, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1969)

In a whole day-process, there was a genuine “*oratoric duel*” between Demosthenes and Eschine, in front of a very interested audience. Their discourses have by the way the same title: “*On the unfaithful embassy*”. Both orators were and have remained famous for ever; but each of them was able to use his own ways and means of persuasion: Demosthenes makes a direct appeal to the concrete facts, to individual actions which, in his interpretation, entered in a serious contradiction with some supreme values and principles; Eschine builds-up his defense not by rejecting those facts/acts – otherwise quite difficult, rather impossible due to the exceptional talent of Demosthenes – but by trying to exploit for his own purpose certain disfunctionalities occurred in various decisive moments (presence of King Philip), namely on the level of Demosthenes' oratorical power! Who was finally the winner of this “*duel*”? Our answer is: *oratoric art as a whole!*



**b) Mihail Kogălniceanu – Barbu Catargiu**

There was a famous dispute on the issue of rural law between defenders of owners and defenders of peasants. The orator Kogălniceanu was morally obliged to recognize that, for combating the draft law, he needed “two long discourses, which lasted – each of them – not less than four-five hours”. His opponent, Catargiu, was powerful not only due to his position as Prime-Minister, but mainly due to his exceptional oratorical abilities. In this dynamic “*duel*”, Kogălniceanu, who has been many years ago strongly criticized by B. Catargiu through several sarcastic metaphors (but still within the limits of a civilized, decent language) is able after a long period of time, to promote a style of genuine polemic, having in mind the following relevant aspects:

*i)* He does not ignore or underestimate the bulk of allegations addressed to him personally; moreover, Kogălniceanu reiterates them, using the same “metaphoric clothes” and giving the impression that such allegations are quite familiar and even acceptable, in the name of generosity and compromise.

*ii)* At the same time, Kogălniceanu does not forget any criticism formulated towards him by Catargiu, despite of the fact that almost three decades have passed since the moment when he was criticized. He reminds such facts not for undertaking again the struggle against his opponent (who otherwise physically disappeared, being assassinated by a “criminal hand” remained unknown for ever), but for proving, over times, his sincere respect and consideration for those great politicians who had the courage to confront him.

*iii)* Moreover, as an expression of what could be called “*solidarity of competence*” (Maria Cornelia Bârliba – *Introducere în retorică*, Editura Printech, București, 2007), Kogălniceanu overcomes, on purpose, some gaps of evaluation and interpretation, condemning the crime against B. Catargiu. It was therefore a *polemic a posteriori*, but it kept carefully all “*rules of the oratorical game*”, despite of the fact that one of the opponents was dead, which means that was unable to fight, to answer, to put questions, to

criticize and to contradict the other person, alive and able to attack or counter-attack.

### c) **Delavrancea – Caion**

In a well-known process Caragiale – Caion, in which the great writer was accused of plagiarism, the lawyer-orator Barbu Ștefănescu-Delavrancea assumed two important juridical tasks: to destroy the author of the serious calumny; to rehabilitate the object of this calumny.

The *peroratio* done by Delavrancea will be dominated otherwise by this dichotomy. The outstanding author, recognized as such by a broad spiritual community in Romania and abroad, is actively defended through the solidity and originality of his masterpieces, while the “*great unknown*” Caion is firmly accused because of his condemnatory gestures and allegations. Stressing some negative features of Caion (pathological wickedness, lie, duplicity), Delavrancea does not consider the latter as a name which should be seriously taken into account, compared with the reputation and celebrity of Caragiale. Therefore, in the limits of a civilized and moderate language, Delavrancea operates a subtle and unexpected transition from the name to a common noun (which designates an individual without any relevance and importance): “*a Caion*”; “*one Caion*”; “*this Caion*”, etc. (Barbu Ștefănescu-Delavrancea – *Discursuri*, Editura Minerva, București, 1977).

In a professional manner, Delavrancea puts an emphasis from the very beginning of his pleading, on *calumny* which was the main weapon of Caion, in blaming Caragiale and his remarkable literary work. For being more persuasive, Delavrancea explains the effects and repercussions of calumny in various situations: an owner could be “attacked” with regard to the concrete modality of utilizing his property; an officer in the army could be accused for poltroonery; a banker will suffer a lot if he is attacked in relation to the banking credit; a judge could be involved in a calumny as far as his impartiality is concerned, etc.

In such a broad framework, to attack a great writer like Caragiale, by contesting/putting under question the whole original literary work (novels, dramas, comedies, articles, etc.) means to destroy as such the sense of his existence in the history of national literature. As it is mentioned by Delavrancea, Caragiale himself was strongly against any calumny; his dramas represent love, not wickedness. The author does not apply calumny to the created comic characters like: Cațavencu, Dandanache, Ipingescu, conu Leonida and many others.

At the same time, while engaging a polemic with the irrelevant Caion, the orator Delavrancea operates a clear and justified distinction between *calumny* and *criticism*: the second interpretative attitude, related to Caragiale's literary writings, could be developed on several levels such as esthetical, philological, philosophical etc. Moreover, the criticism could be oriented towards the period when Caragiale effectively wrote as well as to the reasons explaining the intimate nature of his works. This criticism can be right, clear or passionate, but in every case it needs arguments, proofs, facts and explanatory considerations; otherwise, criticism will become calumny.

Delavrancea does not ignore, in his polemic statements, certain possible excuses or justifications in favor of Caion's attitude because he is ...young and, therefore, innocent. The orator identifies in his behavior "interest (expressed as such), perverseness, evil passion and selfishness... therefore, his forgeries (wrong things) belong to the logic of perversion and not to the innocent caprices of youthfulness". Another paragraph of his pleading, Delavrancea considers that such an innocent age should not be invoked in Caion's case, because this would represent a big insult to the youth and the young age as such. This age is "gracious, generous, enthusiastic. The mistakes of a young man are explained by innocence and disinterest and not by calculation, hate and perversity". Victory of Delavrancea in that process was just a moral one. Nobody – the lawyer or Caragiale himself – did not want to get the condemnation of the calumniator Caion, but just the

elimination – for ever – of accusation of plagiarism, as well as the rehabilitation of the image of the great writer.

#### d) Titulescu – Count Apponyi

This dispute between the Romanian diplomat and Count Albert Apponyi, Hungarian representative to the League of Nations between 1923–1933 is part and parcel of the history of Geneva's international organization. The main topic of the polemic was related to the owners of agricultural fields in Transylvania, who had chosen the Hungarian citizenship due to the right given by the Romanian state, after its unification. In this respect, a series of different, even contradictory interpretations occurred between the two parts involved and therefore the issue had to be examined by famous lawyers from several countries for a long period of time (1923–1930). After a huge polemic between Titulescu and Count Apponyi, the conflict was solved, on the basis of mutually accepted verdicts. That polemic represented a splendid model in terms of ethics, a genuine lesson of civilized behavior, even in some very difficult circumstances when the compromise seems to be impossible and unrealistic.

In the “juridical equation” Titulescu introduced *the human factor* in order to find acceptable solutions for both sides. He recognized that, perhaps, the political problems cannot be solved because they are usually treated “too geometrically”, underestimating the fact that the most rigid and strict logical principles could become more flexible when they are interrelated with “the confidence and the sympathy”. Titulescu very much believed in this moral principle and he continued to promote, through a civilized polemic with Apponyi, the interests of his country. Romanian diplomat had to recognize that, despite of the fact that each opponent in the mentioned issue had the vague impression that his own ideas and assertions are *per se* absolute and perfect truths, they were able to work together in a very friendly manner, by utilizing as much as possible “*courtesy expressions*” and thus avoiding unpleasant terms. “But, please, believe me that through such things

– said Titulescu – there was no weakness with regard to the power of arguments or the clarity of our assertions”. After long sessions, Titulescu and Count Apponyi could be seen leaving the conference hall together, for the delight of journalists and photographers.

Elena Văcărescu, another outstanding Romanian diplomat and orator, when presented the famous oratorical gallery of Geneva, had put together two names – Titulescu and Apponyi, saying the following emotional words: “The son of Attila, installed recently on our places, Count Apponyi, looks – not without anxiety – to this Mongol of high stature (Titulescu) who brings against him the juridical thunderbolts that defeat his out-dated arguments as well as the tents destroyed by winds in the ancient steppes”. (*Hélène Vacaresco – Une grande européenne*, Editions de la Fondation Culturelle Roumaine, Bucarest, 1996)

Making reference to the positive results of the polemic between Titulescu and Count Apponyi, Noel Baker, chairman of the *Association of Unions for the League of Nations* in England, declared the following in a discourse delivered on 13 December 1930: “This was an international achievement”, based on a series of parameters: to fight for many years for promoting a national interest; to be able not to hurt “the international feeling”; to reach a solution acceptable for both sides and also for the signatories of *The Hague Agreements*; finally, to succeed, despite of the “fight’s fire”, to keep “a lasting friendship” for the Count Apponyi.

Oratorical duels methodologically belong to the high standards of rhetoric in action. If a real duel has always a casualty, a victim, in “*the struggle of arguments*” nobody would be killed physically, but there will be in every situation a winner and a loser. The exercise as such is usually very instructive and persuasive for the audience; it provides a diversity of ways and means of “*combative behavior*” (in a positive and constructive sense), *ad-hoc* reactions and self-corrections, sophisticated arguments, verbal challenges (but not invectives or non-civilized expressions). All these tools could ensure a dynamical controversial dialogue as “a

*fight of arguments and perceptions*”, restricted to the limits of a decent language and strictly, observing the basic moral principles of co-existence within a social environment.

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