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Hystericizing Huey: Emotional Appeals, Desire, and the Psychodynamics of Demagoguery

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Drawing on the theories of Jacques Lacan, this essay advances a psychoanalytic theory of demagoguery and charisma. I argue that demagogic rhetoric represents the dialectical interplay of the psychical structures of obsessional neurosis and hysteria, which is animated by desire. This theory is illustrated with an analysis of the discourse of and about one of the most famous US demagogues of the twentieth century, Huey Pierce Long.

Keywords: Charisma; Desire; Emotion; Lacan; Neurosis; Psychoanalysis

The time has come for all good men to rise above principle.

—Huey Pierce Long, attributed

Across the street from my former home in the historic downtown Baton Rouge neighborhood known as Spanish Town, Louisiana’s so-called New State Capitol building towers thirty–four stories above the Mississippi, seated in an impressive series of gardens and carefully groomed shrubbery. I had never heard of the building before moving to Baton Rouge, and shortly after my arrival in July of 2002, I walked across the street to experience the much talked about monument for myself. When I saw it, I was overcome with the kind of adolescent bemusement immortalized in the Washington Monument scene from the 1996 theatrical hit, Beavis and Butthead Do America (Figure 1). Aside from providing Louisianans an endless reference for jokes about the state’s colorful political history, something deathly serious remains after the
Figure 1  Long’s Grave Faces the New State Capitol of Louisiana.
laughter abates. A clue to the gravity of this unusual (or, rather, all too common) monument is that it is “commented” upon by another: in front of the capitol and erected upon the grave of a popular former governor and US state senator, a statue of Huey Pierce Long beholds the New State Capitol in awe (Figure 2), its right hand

Figure 2  The Statue of Huey P. Long Marks His Grave.
thrown back in both bravado and astonishment (Figure 3), its left resting atop a scale model of the building (Figure 4). As the following excerpt from a field guide to the state capitol demonstrates, Long is inextricably wedded to the building, sometimes referred to as “Huey’s monument” or “achievement”:

Huey P. Long, one of the most dynamic personalities ever to flash across the American political scene, dominated Louisiana politics for seven years, serving as [the] Governor from 1928 to 1932 and as a U.S. Senator from 1932 until he was shot to death in 1935. Ironically, he was mortally wounded in a still–unexplained melee inside the capitol, the magnificent structure he conceived, rallied public support for, and pushed to completion in only two years. Even today, more than four decades after his untimely death, his presence still looms large over the entire edifice. (Jolly and Calhoun 2)

The rhetorical figure of Huey haunts the capitol and discourse about it, which is literally guaranteed by the proximity of his interred corpse. The dialogue between these two monuments is about gifts and gifting and consequently engages the rhetoric of responsibility: the statue of Huey is admiring the New State Capitol but also stands in awe of the building that the historical Long helped to erect; his phallus towers over him, symbolically oblivious to Long’s likeness, as if to remind the petrified subject of his duty to “the people.” In this sense, these monuments illustrate the way in which

Figure 3  The Left Hand of the Statue Rests Atop a Scale Model of the Capitol.
human symbolicity is more in control of us than we are of it: from a distance, the large statue of Long is dwarfed by the memorial to his political prowess (Figure 1). After the laughter passes, standing at the site of these monuments one can succumb to an uncanny feeling, a ghostly sensation and intellectual uncertainty about whether the monuments jubilantly celebrate or mournfully regret the death of this important historical figure (of course, it is both). The feeling is uncanny not only because reactions to the historical Long are ambivalent but also because the massive size of these monuments asks the spectator to reckon with his or her own sense of autonomy and significance, to measure up to the power of the symbolic at the same time one measures up to the legacy of a powerful dead man (see Freud, *Uncanny* 120–153; Royle 1–38). Prima facie, words fail to describe this feeling.

Such ambivalence about the figure of Long is homologous to the way scholars have approached and reacted to the elusive rhetorical mode he exemplifies: demagogic rhetoric. Patricia Roberts-Miller has recently argued that although an increased interest in demagoguery has arisen among political theorists, “demagoguery has more or less disappeared from [rhetorical] journals and books” because we simply cannot agree about how to define it (460). As Roberts-Miller frames it, the problem is overcoming disagreement about what makes a demagogue a demagogue with a better or more robust definition. I would add that the dissatisfaction with our previous understanding of the demagogue concerns our failure to attend more studiously to the

Figure 4  The Right Hand of the Statue is Thrown Behind the Body.
particularities of the emotional appeal, which many suggest is the most distinctive feature of demagogic discourse. In this essay, then, I draw upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to advance a more nuanced understanding of demagoguery and, even more specifically, the emotional appeal that centers it.

Using Long as an example, I begin first by suggesting that a psychoanalytic understanding of “desire” helps us to explain better the feeling of being moved by a charismatic speaker (even from beyond the grave!). I then argue that demagogic rhetoric is goaded by the desire-driven, psychical structures of neurosis, namely, obsession and hysteria. In distinction from the hysteric, who constantly identifies him- or herself with the object of another’s desire, the demagogue is an obsessional neurotic, righteously complete, frequently obscuring or erasing audiences as mere objects at the exact moment of professing his or her love for them. Ironically, I argue that the obsessional rhetor appeals to audiences precisely because of his or her apparent completeness and lack of need for listeners—because he hysterizes audiences by claiming to bring order to chaos, thereby representing strength, resolve, and absolute autonomy. Understanding the psychical structures of obsession and hysteria as dialectical modes of charismatic encounter, I argue, explains the psychodynamics of the demagogue as a unique economy or arrangement of desire that places much more emphasis on the feelings inspired by ethos and pathos, and largely at the expense of logos and reasoned argument.

Part I: Desire and the Figure of the Demagogue

Huey P. Long as the Defining Exemplar

Although scholars do not agree on the central characteristics of the demagogue, they do agree on who counts as one. Of the many politicians held out as exemplars of “demagoguery,” Long is among the most popular, so much so that his figure is in many ways a measure for the rest. For example, most of the rhetorical scholarship on demagoguery focuses on the skills and timeliness of the rhetor, and in retrospect, the combination of Long’s skills and the timeliness of his ascent to power are so kairotic that his career has been likened to “the theme for a motion picture scenario, except for the fact that it happened” (Farley in Bormann 244). Long is simultaneously one of the most hated and beloved political figures in the “New (post-Reconstruction) South.” The subject of numerous books, films, and documentaries, Long’s notoriety unquestionably stems from his unique style of statecraft and public address (see Boulard; Bormann; Hogan and Williams, “Rusticity”; Jeansonne; Long, Every; Williams, “The Gentleman”; and Williams, Huey). He rose to state and national fame as an eloquent, charming, and sometimes buffoonish outsider wielding a polarizing and populist rhetorical style. For most of his political career, he attacked the unequal distribution of wealth and the lack of educational opportunities for the poor. As governor, his popularity soared as a result of many state-sponsored gifts: he abolished the poll tax; new roads were constructed and paved throughout Louisiana as a result of his policies; children in the public school system
that Long championed received free textbooks; he built what was once the premiere land- and sea-grant educational institution of the south, Louisiana State University, and insisted on the unparalleled excellence of its football team, the Tigers; he established free hospitals and attempted to socialize healthcare; and he rallied support for the construction of opulent state buildings that included a brand-new governor’s mansion (deliberately modeled after the White House to reflect Long’s presidential ambitions) and, of course, the New State Capitol building.

Long’s oratorical skills were exceptional. Harold Mixon notes that he was renowned for “his ability to adapt his appeals with equal ease to audiences in Louisiana’s Protestant north as well as those of the Catholic south” (Mixon 184). Many scholars have suggested that his deliberately polarizing rhetoric worked by arousing the anger and hopes of the working poor, many of whom lacked the basic everyday conveniences most of us take for granted today, such as running water and electricity. Ernest Bormann notes that although on the national stage Long was initially received as a “clown and a typical southern demagogue,” in Louisiana “Long was taken seriously indeed” (Bormann 214). So seriously, in fact, that on a September Sunday in 1935, he was killed, assassinated by the son-in-law of a political rival. The monuments erected to his political career reflect the significance of Long’s mystery and memory to Louisianans past and present.

Although Bormann suggests that Long is held up as a “typical southern demagogue,” the meanings of this label vary from one scholar to the next. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the ancient meaning of “demagogue” is what most of us today would term a populist. The more contemporary usage, however, is “a political agitator who appeals to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power or further his own interests.” Bormann’s characterization of Long underscores the association of demagoguery with southern populism. Similarly, Roberts-Miller argues that our understanding should not divorce the concept from its populist legacy; she suggests that demagoguery is “polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an ingroup to hate and scapegoat some outgroups” with promises of a coming era of stability and control (462). From a historical vantage, Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan have demonstrated that the demagogue is almost always identified as male. Further, Logue and Dorgan suggest that the study of the figure of the demagogue can be reduced to three caricatures: an insincere, immoral opportunist; a charismatic leader who inflames passions for political ends; and a kind of apocalyptic preacher who amplifies a sense of crisis in order to reveal a novel, faith-based solution (3–6). Central to all of these definitions and rhetorical caricatures, however, is the role of emotional appeals—the inspiration of passion, prejudice, polarization, and hate—which are usually described in a pejorative manner. Curiously, love, that which a demagogue inspires among his or her followers, is scarcely mentioned. Nevertheless, no matter how one defines or characterizes the demagogue, we can at least describe the figure as a passionate person who appeals to the emotions of an audience. But how does the demagogue make these appeals, and what is their character? How do these emotional appeals differ from others? To better discern the specificity of demagoguery, I argue that we need a more sophisticated account of the
“emotional appeal” that is almost universally identified as the demagogue’s primary rhetorical signature.

Demagogic Desire and the Emotional Appeal

With few exceptions, the rhetorical tradition offers little theory that helps us to understand the way in which the emotional appeal works. In general, since the time of Aristotle the study of the emotional appeal tends to fall into either descriptive or instrumentalist accounts. In *On Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle discusses the emotional appeal (*pathos*) in mostly descriptive terms. Emotional appeals have psychological effects on the minds of audiences, insofar as emotions are defined as “mental states,” such as “pity, anger, shame,” and so on (Lee 67). Although the second book of *On Rhetoric* devotes large sections to the emotional appeal, the discussion takes on a pragmatic, behaviorist tone (119–215). As Lee explains, from Aristotle’s point of view, the rhetorician should “devote particular study to the range of several emotions so that each will be understood psychologically along with the practical measures necessary to evoke it” (71). Such a hydraulic model of the emotional appeal (do this to produce that) would persist until the field of psychology began to emerge in the eighteenth century and work by figures such as George Campbell began to emphasize more strongly the psychological basis of emotions, appetites, and passions.

Arthur Walzer has argued that Campbell’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* is the most “complete and coherent account of persuasion that we have” but that “we must shift our focus from epistemology to psychology” to understand why this is the case (84, 73). What is particularly novel about Campbell’s approach to rhetoric is the centrality he gives to the passions: “when persuasion is the end, passion also must be engaged. If it is fancy which bestows brilliancy on our ideas, if it is memory which gives them stability, passion doth more, it animates them. To say that it is possible to persuade without speaking to the passions is but at best a kind of speculative nonsense” (77). The “passions are the source of energy that enables action and the source of values that enable choice,” meaning that without them, the human being is a mere zombie, a biological creature of pure instinct (Campbell, *Philosophy* 78; also see Gunn and Treat). Despite the important development Campbell’s theory of persuasion represents, however, Walzer admits that his discussion of the passions in relation to the emotions and sentiment is somewhat ambiguous, and his approach is more philosophically descriptive than explanatory (Walzer 74). I suggest that if we reframe the emotional appeal in psychoanalytic terms, then we will arrive at a more useful and nuanced understanding. From a Lacanian perspective, the emotional appeal of a demagogue becomes that *quality, characteristic, or part* of a given speaker that is able to stimulate the desire of an audience, something that has often been described with the elusive concept of “charisma.”

So what, then, is desire? From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire refers to the *unconscious wishes* of an individual that, by definition, cannot be satisfied. Lacan’s understanding of desire should be sharply distinguished from the more
common understanding, such as that found in the *OED*: “that feeling or emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected.”

Lacan’s understanding of desire refriges “the object”: with apologies to Mick Jagger, you can *never* get what you desire because, if you did, desire would disappear. To better explain this feeling of not getting what you desire, Lacanians often contrast the concept with “need” and “demand.” Human need refers to purely biological needs (e.g., for food). Demand refers to a request for something (an object, a deed, a gesture, and so on) from another. As with desire, the distinction between need and demand concerns the status or character of the object, as Joan Copjec explains:

> On the level of need the subject can be satisfied by some *thing* that is in the possession of the Other. A hungry child will be satisfied by food—but only food... It is on the next level, that of demand, that love is situated. Whether one gives a child whose cry expresses a demand for love, a blanket, or food, or even a scolding, matters little. The particularity of the object is here annulled; almost any will satisfy—as long as it comes from the one whom the demand is addressed. Unlike need, which is particular, demand is, in other words, absolute, universalizing. (148)

This “universalizing” or formalizing aspect of demand is important, because it underscores *why* the objects of demand are, in some sense, interchangeable. Demands reflect an emotional drive or push for “something more,” insofar as the “Other now appears to give something more than just these objects,” a something more that Lacan terms the object-cause or the *objet a* (Copjec 148–149). In other words, whereas need is satisfied with the production of a specific object, demand represents at least a partial awareness that there is something more to the person who produces the object that is more important. The demand for this something more is the demand for a special kind of recognition: love.

The demand for love is problematic, however, because it mistakenly assumes this something more of the Other can be given away. Love, in this sense, is premised on the lie that the object-cause is attainable (as anyone who has been in romantic or courtly love might recognize, this something more is impossible to describe or to possess). For Lacan, “love is essentially deception” (*Four Fundamental* 268). In light of love’s deception, “desire” is therefore the word for what is really happening to a subject when she feels that familiar pull of emotion toward an object or another. Desire is the feeling of lacking the presumed *object a* and of pulsating around a substitute as the next best thing. For example, sexual desire can be stirred by a partial or part object, such as a human breast (the classic example), but one knows very well that the point of sexual desire is not to “get” the breast but the yearning for this “something more” beyond the breast (see Krips 22–24). Copjec explains that with desire, “the Other retains what it does not have”—this something-more—“and does not surrender it to the subject.” Consequently an individual’s desire does not aim toward an object but is caused or inspired by this elusive “something more,” this *object a*, which the Other cannot surrender (Copjec 148–149).

Incorporating these Lacanian notions of demand and desire into the received understanding of emotional appeals expands its explanatory power, but not without some modification. Traditionally, the emotional appeal has been discussed in terms
of a rhetor’s ability to produce or promise something that the audience wants (Desire → Object). So, for example, Aristotle suggests that one can enflame an audience’s anger through the symbolic destruction of a person (the object) that has insulted or belittled the listeners (Aristotle 124–130). In regard to the demagogue, Kenneth Burke identified the emotional appeal working primarily to scapegoat a common enemy (the object) through the processes of identification and division (Philosophy 191–220). Roberts-Miller notes that “an important goal of the demagogue is to prevent” division among the ingroup by keeping “identification strictly within the ingroup, and to ensure no sense of consubstantiation with the outgroup: ‘Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all’” (463). In the traditional scapegoating scenario, the object of desire is (presumably) the destruction or removal of a common foe.

The psychoanalytic understanding of the emotional appeal is different, insofar as desire has no object but rather is caused or stimulated by an object or quality (Cause → Desire). So with Aristotle’s example of anger arousal, the target is really a ruse. Understood as a stimulus to anger, the desirous appeal to enflame an audience has more to do with the way in which the rhetor’s manner, tone, voice, and physical characteristics stimulate their desiring, by becoming a cause of, or at least a catalyst for, their desiring. In other words, a rhetor’s ability to turn an audience into an angry mob is not achieved primarily by providing a target for their ire, even though the mob believes that the destruction of this target is the object of their passions. Rather, the rhetor him- or herself is the cause and the mob identifies with his or her desire to have, for example, a political opponent defeated. Although the rhetor convinces the audience that they really want a given object (Desire → Object), in actuality, he or she is the cause of their desiring, and the ostensible object is ultimately exchangeable with another (Cause → Desire).

The psychoanalytic read of demagogic scapegoating therefore changes: although hating a common enemy is the end of scapegoating, the source of its appeal in a given rhetorical situation concerns the audience’s desire to please the rhetor; the arousal of anger is produced out of love for the rhetor, not hatred of a common foe. The real cause of their desiring is the objet a, which cannot be given. The emotional appeal is therefore fundamentally deception but, with regards to Nietzsche, “in a non-moral sense.”

To say that the emotional appeal turns on love’s deception is not to say that individuals do not believe that their desire pertains to a specific object. The ruse object of the emotional appeal is a result of “fixation.” Indeed, we can define the emotional appeal as the masquerade of desire in demand, the causation of a fixation. Maintaining persuasion through emotional appeal requires the parade of a series of surrogates that betoken the objet a—otherwise, persuasion would cease. Let us take, for example, a self-aggrandizing joke that Huey Long told before a crowded room of dignitaries as he was readying himself for a run for the White House. In a newsreel that ran in Northern state theatres, an opening shot presents Huey speaking in a variety of venues inside a series of bubbles, four smaller bubbles in each coroner of the screen and a larger bubble in the middle. In the center bubble, Long appears in a tuxedo, smiling. A voice-over begins: “Presenting his Excellency, Huey Pierce Long, the
dictator of Louisiana, the enigma who is making many Americans regret that the United States ever purchased Louisiana."

The screen cuts to the contents of the center bubble; Huey appears in the center screen with his arms behind his back. With a smile and a lilting, Southern drawl, he gives the following statement:

I was elected railroad commissioner in 1918 [a small smile]; and they tried to impeach me in 1920 [Long leans forward, a bigger smile appears, but his arms are still behind his back; louder laughter from the audience is heard]. When they failed to impeach me in 1920, they indicted me in 1921 [Long leans forward again with a bigger smile, and louder laughter comes from the audience]. And I, when I wiggled through that I managed to become governor in 1928... and they impeached me in 1929 [a big smile appears on Long’s face, and there is even louder laughter].

In this brief example, Long advances a subtle pedagogy of desire in the form of a joke, and its success is measurable in the increasing laughter of the audience at each turn (one can liken this appeal to Freud’s famous example of the Fort-Da game, which is obverse of the peek-a-boo game, both forms of teasing [Freud, Beyond 13–17; and see Krips 22–25]). From the audience’s perspective, Long will not give his enemies what they want, eluding them at every step, thereby creating a homology between the audience’s desiring and the desiring of Long’s enemies. Mindful of being labeled a demagogue, Long signaled his embrace of insincerity by his self-characterization as “wiggling” out of impeachments and indictments, as if he is a kind of lovable outlaw. The pull of the emotional appeal here is not reducible to simple identification (e.g., you the audience are like me, Huey, and we share a common foe: “they”). Rather, by hinting at the substitute object of desire—a fixation on the admission of guilt or a refutation of the changes against him—Long inspires this pull for “something more,” for love, tacitly promising he has the power to give something that he does not have. In short: the audience laughs at Long’s humor because they love him, or rather, they love the “something more” in him. He functions as the cause of their desiring, and they want similarly to be the objects of his desire.

Part II: The Psychical Structures of Demagoguery

So far I have suggested that the figure of the demagogue is characterized as a passionate person who moves audiences principally by means of the emotional appeal. I noted that the received rhetorical understanding of the emotional appeal tends toward either narrow description or mechanical hydraulics, both of which are unsatisfying and fail to capture the ever-elusive experience of charisma. I have argued that an alternate explanation of the suasion of the emotional appeal is that it taps into an unconscious desire of audiences, understood as the push of an unfulfillable wish that is better described as the “desire for the desire of the Other.” Insofar as any emotional appeal works by stimulating the desiring of the audience, the question arises: what is unique about the emotional appeal of the demagogue? What sets demagogic rhetoric apart from other modes? As a variety of demand, scapegoating is not unique to the demagogue (although it is common), so something more fundamental must be at
work. I suggest that demagoguery is unique in the particular way it structures desiring as the love of a hysterical audience for an obsessive “master.”

The novelty of Lacan’s approach toward understanding culture and identity can be located in the ways in which he draws from structuralist thought (however ironically) to undermine essentialism (see Copjec 1–14). When Lacan refers to “structure,” he usually means social constructs—even those particular to an individual’s psyche. For Lacan, structures refer to fixed social or symbolic relations “between loci which are themselves empty,” meaning that the stability of the structure—precarious as it may be—is located in the relation, not the objects at either end (Evans 194; also see Levi-Strauss 55–66). For example, one’s sexual position is not an all-or-nothing category but a precarious positioning in relation to a symbolic object that is empty of content or substance.21 From this perspective, rhetoric becomes a trace or symptom of deeper psychical structures that specify relations or positions, not essences. Below, I will suggest that demagogic rhetoric is suggestive of the structures of obsessional neurosis and hysteria, two subject positions that manifest different kinds of rhetoric.22

The Structures of Neurosis

For the Lacanian analyst, every individual subject exhibits one of three psychical structures that predominate (although not necessarily all the time): neurosis, psychosis, and perversion. The psychotic and perverse are the most unusual kinds of subject structures. To greater or lesser degrees, most of us are neurotic, and neurosis comes in two types, obsession and hysteria, which I address in turn.23

The obsessional neurotic is an individual who is convinced of his or her completeness and autonomy and who is resolutely determined to deny the notion of an unconscious or any repressed wish.24 Fink uses an intriguing imaginary scenario to describe the relationship of the obsessive to the Other, the assumed object of his or her desiring: The obsessive neurotic is the kind of person who, while making love to his or her partner, arranges for another love interest to phone during the act. He or she answers the phone and has a conversation while still making love (Fink 124). Such a scenario represents an obsessive fantasy of autonomy: by answering the phone (or even by imagining one is making love to someone else) the obsessive erases or denies the Other as having some control or interest in him or her. The obsessive cannot tolerate the fact that another makes demands on him or her and, by extension, that he or she is not in complete conscious control (Fink 122). The obsessive fears disappearing or “fading” (aphanisis), and for this reason the surrogate objects of his or her desire are never enough. That is to say, the obsessive is like an addict of sorts, and for him others act as various interchangeable containers for a desire that cannot be achieved—an impossible desire. For practicing clinicians, because masculinity is culturally associated with self-mastery and self-control, obsessives tend to be men (but not always).25 Male subjectivity, in other words, is culturally articulated to the psychical structure obsessional neurosis, and consequently, those who are assigned the role “male” at birth are often socialized into obsession.
Hysterics, on the other hand, deny or erase themselves, continually establishing an unsatisfied desire. The hysteric identifies with the Other’s desire and wants to be its object. Or in other words, the hysteric desires as if he or she were someone else, identifying with the gaze of another, kind of like an out-of-body experience. Freud paints a scenario, referred to as the “the butcher’s wife,” that helps us understand the hysteric, who, not surprisingly, is usually a woman (Freud, *Interpretation* 116–118). The butcher’s wife (tellingly, Fink underscores that she has no name) notices one day that her faithful and loving husband flirts with another woman who is not his type (Fink 125). Later that night she dreams that she is this other woman, literally identifying with her as her husband’s supposed object of desire. Consequently, the hysteric’s subject position “involves a detour via a man,” and the pleasure of her self-erasure is derived by self-deprivation. Whereas the obsessive is singular or monumentally phallic, the hysteric is implicated, as the immortal new-wave band New Order has sung, in a “bizarre love triangle,” a circuit of desire that always implicates a mediating thirdness.

Insofar as desire is the desire of the Other and insofar as most people are either hysterics or obsessives, we can already start to see how demagoguery is an intense amplification of their dialectic. From a psychoanalytic vantage, demagoguery can be understood as a relation between the hysterical and the obsessive, which means that demagoguery is essentially a neurotic relationship between a given rhetor and an audience. If demagoguery is essentially neurotic, then no one can get what they believe that they want, or persuasion ceases and the desirous charge of charisma fades. In other words, (endlessly) delayed satisfaction is central to charisma. The demagogue presents him or herself as a complete, autonomous individual with a tantalizing, emotional power, and his rhetoric will therefore harbor all the hallmarks of a lover who answers his cell phone while making love to you. What has passed as charisma is thus better understood not only as a demagogue’s ability to promise love with gifts (the ruse of the emotional appeal) but as his simultaneous ability to *withhold* his love, his ability to hint to audiences that *he may be insincere.* The desire the demagogue sets into motion is not reducible to fooling audiences with presents, which tends to be the way in which he is characterized. What has been misunderstood about the rhetorical power of the demagogue is precisely his ability to deploy and maintain suspicion among his lovers that he may possibly be insincere, that he may have other lovers in play. For example, Long’s joke about “wiggling” out of a litany of impeachments and indictments reflects the necessity of the possibility that Long is an insincere criminal; if this weren’t a possibility, the audience would not have laughed. The argument here is that charisma *requires* suspicion, conscious or not, because the magnetism of the demagogue derives power from *lack.* This is why those moved by a demagogue may very well know they are being deceived and succumb to desire anyway! The centrality of suspicion to demagoguery is why, allegorically speaking, Huey P. Long had to be killed: because the jealous lover was an overdetermined, psychical role—and it is no mere coincidence many charismatic leaders die similarly.

Insofar as the obsessional demagogue engenders a circuit of desire, then, charisma becomes the ability to induce or incite hysteria, when we understand hysteria as the
psychical structure whereby an individual identifies with the desire of the Other (as opposed to, for example, the mindless abandon and chaos that passes for hysteria in Hollywood disaster films). The demagogue hystericizes audiences, encouraging them to see themselves as he claims to see them. This notion is similar, of course, to McGee’s understanding of the rhetorical function of “the people.” The hystericization of the audience, however, differs with respect to the role desire plays in suturing audiences to a given demagogue: the vision of the “people” with whom an audience comes to identify is inextricably associated with the demagogue. The true believer is not in love with an idealization of herself as a member of this or that party or Long’s famous “Share the Wealth” club and so on (see Hogan and Williams, “Rusticity” 159–164). She is in love with his impossible perfect people, self-alienated and incapable of satisfying desire. Another way to put this is that demagogues are successful and persuasive only to the extent that audiences derive pleasure from never truly getting what they are promised or, put alternately, getting precisely what they desire: nothing final, nothing certain, no (love) object.  

Part III: Long’s Demagoguery from Speeches to Monuments

Insofar as all rhetorical appeals seek to stimulate the desiring of audiences, demagoguery is unique in the way its rhetoric reflects the attempt of a given obsessive rhetor to “hystericize” audiences with emotional appeals (understood not only in terms of the use of language but also in terms of vocalics, gesture, and other qualities of delivery), thereby setting desire into motion within a circuit, often with the ruse of some object of fixation (real or promised) that betokens love (e.g., new buildings and roads, free textbooks for schoolchildren, and so on). Whereas many modes of rhetorical address feature a charismatic rhetor promising this or that object, demagoguery is discernable by noting the intensity of emotion that is created by the dialectic of obsession and hysteria, by the ferocity of followers and the harshness of enemies. More specifically, however, we should also be able to identify demagogic rhetoric—or at least a nascent demagoguery—when we observe a conspicuously sustained pairing of hysterical and obsessive structures in discourse: when there are classically obsessive assertions (statements about the rhetor’s invincibility, autonomy, and so on) paired with characterizations of the audience as dependent and needing love (statements about rescuing the audience, giving supposedly needed gifts to the audience, and so on), there is demagoguery. Not surprisingly, Long’s speeches and the monuments erected to him evince the structure of obsessional neurosis and attempt to situate the auditor or spectator as a hysterical subject. By taking note of the way in which both Long’s discourse and the discourse about him evinces psychical structures, we see that demagoguery coheres less as a stereotype than as a cultural role or function.

In the most recent work published on Long and demagoguery, “The Rusticity and Religiosity of Huey P. Long,” J. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams argue that many scholars have mistakenly explained away the “fierce loyalty among [Long’s] supporters” and “murderous hostility among his critics” by reducing the politician to a stereotype of a Southern demagogue, which they characterize as “a thoroughly
unprincipled speaker who masterfully exploited the insecurities and prejudices of his ignorant, hillbilly following” (151). By examining the “political persona” Long crafted in public speeches and his famed radio addresses (see Bormann), Hogan and Williams combat the demagogue label by showing how Long “did not exhibit many of the definitive characteristics of the classic Southern demagogue” (“Rusticity” 152). Hogan and Williams are perplexed that Long’s most renowned biographer, T. Harry Williams, argued that Long’s “‘skill with words’ [was] but a ‘minor’ factor in his political success” and endeavor to show that Long’s way with words was, in fact, a major factor in two ways: first, in the construction of a plain-speaking, “rustic political persona” in his public speeches; and second, in the creation of a preacher-like persona in his radio addresses (“Rusticity” 155). If we think of demagoguery in terms of neurotic structures, however, we can start to see why countless scholars characterize Long as a demagogue. Furthermore, locating the obsessive-hysterical dialectic in Long’s rhetoric and in rhetoric about Long helps to demonstrate the ways in which Long’s rusticity and preacherly style have more to do with his psychical persona and less to do with his words.

The problem with studying Long’s discourse is that entire speeches are difficult to come by. Perhaps for this reason, Hogan and Williams range across a wide variety of texts to demonstrate the ways Long’s “rustic” and “preacherly” personae were established and maintained serially. I think Hogan and Williams successfully isolate the best examples of Long’s rhetoric and so will follow their lead. The authors’ first extended exemplar is taken from Long’s autobiography, *Every Man a King*. To illustrate his “self-portrait as a rube with remarkable rhetorical talents”, Hogan and Williams (“Rusticity” 157) isolate the “tear-jerking peroration” of a speech Long gave in St. Martinsville, Louisiana, under the “Evangeline Oak immortalized by Longfellow” during the 1928 gubernatorial race:

> And it is here, under this oak where Evangeline waited for her lover, Gabriel, who never came. This oak is an immortal spot, made so by Longfellow’s poem, but Evangeline is not the only one who has waited here in disappointment. Where are the schools that you have waited for your children to have, that have never come? Where are the roads and the highways that you send your money to build, that are no nearer now than ever before? Where are the institutions to care for the sick and disabled? Evangeline wept bitter tears in her disappointment, but it lasted through only one lifetime. Your tears in this country, around this oak, have lasted for generations. Give me the chance to dry the eyes of those who still weep here! (Long, *Every* 99)

Hogan and Williams isolate this passage as an example of Long’s mastery of the emotional appeal but stop short of explaining why this passage would have moved an audience. If we understand Long’s allusion to Longfellow’s *Evangeline* as establishing an allegorical relationship between an obsessive and a hysterical, however, suddenly the rhetoric’s appeal unfolds, complementing their descriptive analysis. *Evangeline* is an 1847 epic poem, no doubt very familiar to Louisianans, which tells the story of two expelled Acadians who are separated on their wedding day, Evangeline Bellefontaine and Gabriel Lajeunesse. Once Evangeline arrives in Louisiana, she
discovers that Gabriel had preceded her but departed for the Ozarks; she is overcome with sadness under an oak tree. The key to understanding the emotional appeal of Long’s reference to Evangeline concerns how he positions himself, not as Gabriel returned, but as another lover who has the power to “dry the eyes” of generations. The implied auditor or “second persona” in this brief passage is doubly hysterical: on the one hand, it is the persona of a people like Evangeline, waiting in hope for something to arrive; on the other hand, through the vehicle of the story of romantic longing, the audience identifies with Long’s desire for a “chance” to dry their eyes (see Black 109–119). Unquestionably, this emotional appeal works because of the real-life hardships experienced by the audience in St. Martinsville. Yet it also works because Long positions the audience as a hysteric, as a subject of lack who desires what Long desires. In other words, the ruse of the identification is with Gabriel or some other prince charming; what the audience really identifies with is Long’s vision of them as Evangeline and his desire to take care of them.

Of course, Long’s poetic allusions are not enough to explain how audiences are moved; the tone and timbre of Long’s boastful, masculine voice unquestionably played a role. Perhaps for this reason, Hogan and Williams then turn their attention to Long’s preacherly tone in his most famous rhetorical feat, the national radio addresses. “Combining colloquial, even ungrammatical language with folksy analogies and emotional appeals, he ‘chatted’ informally about a wide range of topics’ on the radio during the early 1930s as his ambitions for the White House grew (“Rusticity” 159). Hogan and Williams draw special attention to how Long “lived up to his reputation as a ‘master’ of emotional appeals” by reading newspaper stories in support of his “Share the Wealth” campaign:

It was bitterly cold. Frail Mrs. Ella Martindale huddled with her four children close to an insufficient stove. The baby, 5 months old, wailed fitfully in fever under blankets on the floor.

All awaited return of Murrian Martindale, the father, who promised when he left for his shift as a cab driver that “I’ll bring something to eat, some way”… A strangling cough wracked the infant girl. The mother acted in desperation. Wrapping blankets around the baby and a ragged coat around her own shoulders, she ordered the oldest girl to watch the other children. She raced from the room, carrying the sick child.

Mrs. Martindale had no car fare but she went. She walked—six blocks—with the thermometer at 16 above zero. She stumbled on the steps to the hospital.

“My baby,” she sobbed to a nurse, “she’s sick.” The nurse peered into the blankets, then took the little bundle.

“She’s dead,” she said. (“Rusticity” 160–161)

Curiously, this example is offered without commentary. From a psychoanalytic vantage, however, much more is going on here than “disturbing” portraiture. First, it is important to underscore that Long did not compose this rhetoric, that these are not his words. Long merely lent these words a voice and, in doing so, hijacked the relationship that the structure of newspaper stories creates between reporters and readers: an all-knowing subject reporting on the impotence of (its) subjects. In other words, Long is stepping into a rhetorical field that prefigured him; he is not the
source of invention. This is an important point to underscore, for it demonstrates Roberts-Miller’s contention that demagogues “rarely create new perceptions” but instead step into preexisting fears and hatreds (471–472). Yet Long’s example also confounds Roberts-Miller’s suggestion that “it is quite possible to have demagoguery without demagogues,” because it is the particularity of Long—his voice, his preacherly tone—and the way that he positions himself as an obsessive speaking to a hysterical that makes the emotional appeal of simply reading a newspaper powerful: the love object of the (dead) infant creates an audience identification with Huey’s desire to help the mother who cannot provide for it, a variation of Evangeline. Through his delivery and preacherly tone, Long routinely places his audiences in an imaginary position of lack, identifying with his presumed desire to help the failed mother and Evangeline, both of whom are feminized figures who have lost their love objects.

Indeed, when one consults Long’s rhetoric in his autobiography and speechcraft, one repeatedly recognizes the obsessive-hysteric structure: the second persona or idealized audience is routinely described in passive and helpless terms, while Long always positions himself as the opposite, a superhuman impervious to attack. Ultimately, hysterical subject positions demand obsessives because the structures cohere and together sustain desire. This is why Long consistently and repeatedly modeled the opposite of lack, as demonstrated by the following stump speech:

[My enemies] will tell you that I carry a pistol. You bet your sweet life. I admit that at certain times I carry a pistol, and sometimes, two of them. . . . Not only that, but at times they will tell you I use strong language. Well, I am not going to deny that. I just want to tell you that when you go through what I have gone through and keep from cursing a little bit, you needn’t worry about the Saints Yonder, because you will have one right here. (“Gov. Long”)

The alignment of weaponry, strong language, and Long’s persona as “demagogue” is not coincidental: these elements taken together connote an absence of lack or need, absolute autonomy. As T. Harry Williams argues, Long’s “skill with words was only one of several factors that explain his success, and a minor one at that.” He continues, “The quality above all others that a mass leader must have is audacity—a boundless self-confidence . . . a brazen courage . . . and a daring imagination” (“The Gentleman” 18–19). Williams notes that Long was “pure act,” meaning that his charisma could not be reduced to his words. Furthermore, from a psychoanalytic vantage, this notion of “pure act,” the idea that Huey was more than his words, is unmistakably “phallic.” While I regret that there is not space enough to detail the function of the phallus in psychoanalytic theory (the exceedingly complex debate over the phallus in Lacan rages on [see Butler 57–91; Campbell, Arguing 131–158]), it should be said that the reason the phallus is associated with the “pure act” is that when the label is associated with an object, the object appears as if it has an agency of its own. So, for example, anything that changes or moves presumably of its own accord—anything that is said to be autonomous—is phallic in function for both men and women: the penis becomes flaccid and erect; the womb expands and contracts; a sports car comes and goes; the newborn wiggles uncontrollably (Hill 103–108). “You bet your sweet life [I carry a pistol]” is another way of proclaiming the illusory autonomy of the obsessive.
Although Long’s demagoguery is inextricable from his person, its field extends dialogically to texts about him as well. As with any powerful rhetor, charismatic ethos is cocreated intertextually and dialogically. It is in this regard that I opened the essay with a brief reading of the statue on Long’s grave and the New State Capitol. Of course, these monuments (Figures 1 and 2) represent the structures of obsessional neurosis in characteristically phallic terms. Although the New State Capitol does not move or change of its own accord, insofar as it doubles as a signifier of state governance, it also is synecdoche for an obsessive demagogue and his political regime, which expanded radically during Huey Long’s seven-year stewardship of the state. In this respect, the building is a “text,” mirroring what Long frequently modeled in his speeches: an agency without lack, complete autonomy—a phallus. It is not surprising, then, that the agency of the symbolic connoted by the phallus is strongly reflected in the history of the development of Louisiana’s New State Capitol building: despite the fact that the building is overdetermined as “Huey’s Monument,” as was true of many of his radio addresses in which he read newspaper stories, Long neither designed the building nor oversaw its construction, as is often assumed (Kubly 15). That honor goes to the architectural firm of Weiss, Dreyfous and Seiferth and to the contractor George A. Fuller (who also oversaw the construction of the Lincoln Memorial). Occupied with a recent impeachment trial and dreams of a national office, Long “gave only two instructions to the architects: the building was to be a skyscraper, rather than the usual domed capitol, and it was to depict the history of the state” (Jolly and Calhoun 17). Unquestionably Huey desired a steel-framed skyscraper because it was in keeping with the myth of the self-made man, an obsessional dynamic that continues to underwrite contemporary performances of masculinity (see Catano). Yet that the monument so completely resembles a phallus is not a consequence of Huey’s desire but is the result of a popular hunger. In other words, Huey was not in control of the symbolic; the symbolic was in control of Huey.

The triangulation of the discursive figure of Long represented by his statue (Figure 2), Louisianans, and the phallic capitol (Figure 1) takes on a psychoanalytic significance beyond what is immediately obvious, particularly when the representative of the phallic function in this triangle is often (mis)understood as a gift from desperate Louisianans to Huey. Not only are these three positions homologous to the “love triangle” of hysteria (and we can also claim that most monuments function similarly) but they also betoken the intense desperation of Southern poverty that contributed to hystericization, the proximity of popular desire to sheer need. Historians have documented—almost to excess—the “hopeless” and “wretched poverty” of rural Louisianans in the early part of the twentieth century, primarily to explain Long’s popular appeal and secondarily to explain the appeal of fascism (see Jeansonne). “Huey’s Monument” is a colossal phallus precisely because it represents the desperation of his constituency and the soul-deep need of the impoverished; it represents what Huey Pierce Long represented to Louisianans and to himself, a complete, energetic, self-made man impervious to want and need, a creature of absolute symbolic and economic autonomy, a masterful signifier without a signified. The New State Capitol represents a man whose visage rested alongside none other than Jesus Christ.
above the fireplace mantels of many of his constituents. Insofar as these monuments reenact the scene of demagoguery, insofar as standing beneath them can invite one to adopt the position of the hysteric, they betoken the “something more” in Long: they are substitutes in the wake of the loss of the big Other. Joan Copjec observes that “the only way to be master of desire... is to be either impotent or dead” (157). Hence, Long’s personal shortcomings and failures—his insincerity—sustained his demagogic charisma while he was alive. And as these monuments attest, Long’s assassination only served to sustain his power in death. Huey haunts because he continues to promise an impossible love from beyond the grave.

**Concluding Remarks: Toward a Critical Hystericization**

In this essay, I advanced a theory of the demagogue as an obsessional neurotic who asserts an obsessive position in order to hystericize audiences. I illustrated this theory along the way with reference to the speechcraft of Long and to two public monuments erected to his legacy in downtown Baton Rouge, Long’s grave and the so-called New State Capitol building that towers above it. I argued that if we understand the demagogue as an individual who hystericizes audiences, then the mystery and allure of the demagogue, his “charisma,” is easier to explain as a function of desire in interpersonal space, which is not reducible to words alone. Such an understanding of demagoguery has a number of implications for rhetorical theory.

First, the powerful, emotional field created by the obsessive-hysteric dialectic suggests that the ineffable category of “charisma” is a dynamic one and experienced in the seemingly “real” presence of people and objects in Sensurround. Charisma cannot be reduced to mere semantic effects (e.g., the textual meaning of a speech). Consequently, neither a written description of a speaker nor a speech text can capture the desirous dynamics of a charismatic speaker as well as a recording of his or her voice, a photograph of his appearance, or some other “text” that betokens presence, especially a film or television recording that captures the gestures and demeanor of a speaker. Some token of presence, however illusory, is necessary for any theory of charismatic encounter. This is why I have suggested that the experience of monuments erected to Huey’s honor also captures this dynamic. As colossal substitutes, they capture the uncanny, interpersonal feeling of demagogic charisma. When standing between Long’s grave and the New State Capitol building, one is dwarfed in the presence of something more powerful and much greater than oneself, something that the monuments betoken, yet something that is not reducible to the monuments as such.

Second, the Lacanian refiguring of the object of the emotional appeal as a ruse and its replacement with the objet a or the “something more” of a given rhetor suggests a need for a more broad-based rethinking of the emotional appeal. Demagoguery is an extreme case that helps us to see how desiring is central to charisma, but there may be less exaggerated modes of address (e.g., more deliberative and less obsessive rhetorics) that Lacan’s understanding of desire can help to explain. At the very least, against the original Aristotelian distinction between ethos and pathos, demagogic persuasion suggests that emotional appeals are always already character appeals and are
indissolubly wedded in terms of some trait or characteristic of the orator. Emotional appeals work because they function paternally at an unconscious level to stimulate the question of desire (“what does she or he want from me?”). Understanding desire as a better explanation of the emotional appeal indicates that eunoia or goodwill toward the audience links ethos with pathos in the project of love’s deception.

Finally, I want to close by suggesting that psychoanalysis implicates a telos for criticism that has already been called for in many ways but which, perhaps, this reading of Long’s demagoguery helps make easier to see. When beheld at the same time (Figure 1), Huey’s likeness and the largest monument erected to his memory represent the hystericization of the obsessively neurotic: the hands of Huey’s likeness are thrown back, his eyes open in awe, as he beholds the sublime object erected to his memory. Unlike the historical Huey, the monumental figure of Huey is open to the phallus, the signifier of the lack of the Other. These monuments materialize the fear of the historical Long, which is his fading or disappearing in the presence of the Other (aphanisis). Indeed, these monuments in dialogue abstractly signify the direction of the analytic treatment by a therapist of the obsessively neurotic, whereby the absent third is the analyst:

If analysis is to have any effect on the obsessive, the analyst must foster hystericization; cast in the role of Other by the analysand, the analyst must continually bring to bear his or her desire... in order to thwart the... shuttering off of the obsessive... Analysts who work with obsessives are quite familiar with the obsessive’s tendency to talk on and on, to associate and interpret all by himself, pay no heed to the analyst’s punctuations or interpretations. Indeed, the analyst often has to make a considerable effort to stop the obsessive from bulldozing right over his or her intervention.... (Fink 131)

As critics interested in charismatic historical figures, perhaps our homologous charge is to hystericize such figures in order to show how the symbolic is in more control of them than they are of it. The purpose of such a project is not to banish obsessive or hysterical structures, for these are unavoidable. Rather, the purpose of hystericizing the demagogue and analogous figures is ultimately to temper what James Patrick McDaniel has recently called “the arrogant self” that centers any overly prideful patriotism (347). In other words, coming to terms with the subject of the symbolic implicates a theoretical and—admittedly—political program that hystericizes the most prized figure of rhetorical studies, the self-transparent agent or individual (see Biesecker 147–153). In this respect, the strangely phallic monuments articulated to the figure of Huey might memorialize not only the death of the demagogue but also the self-transparent, autonomous subject that subtends him.

Notes

[1] In the film, two teenage boys, Beavis and Butthead, travel the country in search of their stolen beloved television set and, along the way, are hired by a prostitute in Las Vegas to search for her husband. In one scene, the two ninth-graders are in Washington, DC, and behold the Washington Monument for the first time; the boys giggle uncontrollably without comment.
For an excellent account of this colorful history, see Parent’s *Inside the Carnival*.

Although Miller-Roberts calls for a return to theorizing and criticizing demagoguery in the name of deliberative democracy, I suspect that the unstated exigency and recent return to studying demagoguery is the arrival of a righteous, polarizing rhetoric to the discourse of the current presidential administration (see Gunn, “Exorcism”; Murphy; Noon). As James Patrick McDaniel has suggested, George W. Bush has become “the grand wizard of theopolitics in the world today,” and trying to figure out the unique—if not uncanny—appeal of his rhetoric to many US citizens presents us with a pickle similar to that of demagoguery. For a compelling argument that explains the persistence of George W. Bush, see Copjec 141–162. Although the present essay does not offer an analysis of contemporary political discourse, I join Roberts-Miller in calling for a renewed study of demagoguery for what it might teach us about our contemporary plight.

Perhaps another reason is that we feel conflicted about our demagogues: although we are supposed to despise them, some of us harbor affection for particulars, such as Huey Long (see Bormann; Hogan and Williams, “Rusticity”). Like the effect of standing in front of the massive statue of Long, our emotional ambivalence about the figure of the demagogue manifests a love-hate sensibility in past rhetorical scholarship. Insofar as we cannot bracket our feelings from our criticism, perhaps one reason for this failure to engage the emotional appeal is the common habit of self-subtraction from a rhetor’s emotional field in the critical act.

For the classic accounts of demagoguery, see Bennett; Larson; and Luthin.

The films were all but destined: See *All the King’s Men* (Columbia Pictures, 1950); *Lion in the Streets* (Warner Brothers, 1953), and *Kingfish: A Story of Huey P. Long* (Turner Home Entertainment, 1995).


In his influential study, *Southern Demagogues*, Allan Louis Larson is careful not to deride emotional appeals. “For him, a demagogue is simply a political leader or public figure which operates through appeals to the passions,” who may or may not be insincere (in Logue and Dorgan 5).

Nietzsche’s discussion of rhetoric in relation to the body and music is a notable exception, as well as George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (see Campbell, *Philosophy; Nietzsche; and Walzer*).

Such observations find contemporary support in the work of cognitive neurology (see Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*; and Damasio, *Feeling*).

My understanding of charisma is more in keeping with those who have sought psychological accounts based on the qualities or characteristics of individual speakers. I disagree with the approach to charisma taken by J. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams, which, protests to the contrary, displaces a focus on the psyches of audiences and speakers with an attention to the charismatic “message.” For them, the proper “rhetorical” approach to charisma is to focus on the content of the message. As I try to show in this essay, where charisma is concerned, the ways in which the speaker creates a circuit of desire or suasion with the materiality of speech and bodily presence is just as important as the message; in my account, vocalics and gesture may be more significant rhetorically than what the speaker actually says. For comparison, see Hogan and Williams, “Republican”; and Hogan and Williams, “Rusticity”. For an excellent review of the literature on charisma, see Treat.


Again, it is important to underscore that the reason desire is not aiming for a specific object is because if that object were attainable, then desire would disappear. Hence, desire
is ceaselessly metonymic, moving “from one object to the next… Desire is an end in itself; it seeks only more desire, not fixation on a specific object” (Fink 26).

[15] The parenthetical diagrams here are taken from Fink 51.

[16] Alternately stated, the emotional appeal seeks identification of the “cunning” variety—whether or not the rhetor is aware of what she is doing (see Burke, *Rhetoric* 35–36).

[17] For Lacan, the “cause” of desire is the object a, which can be anything, but it is often a quality, characteristic, or part of a person that sets desire into motion. This “cause-object,” as it were, can be mistaken for what is called a “part-object,” such as a woman’s breast, or it can be the timbre of someone’s voice, a mannerism, even a characteristic gesture. This quality, characteristic, or thing unconsciously reminds the subject of her first desiring in childhood. The object a can also be understood in terms of the question of desire: Fink explains that as infants we soon learn that “the more completely we satisfy [our parents’] wishes, the more love we are likely to win from them.” Unfortunately, our parents do not always “tell us what they want,” confining themselves “to telling us what they do not want, punishing us after the fact for a faux pas” (Fink 53–54). Consequently, desire is inaugurated in the self-conscious subject in the form of a question: “What is it they want (Che vuoi)?” In this respect, Lacan defines desire as a question and quest for the desire of the Other: “Le désir de l’homme, c’est le désir de l’Autre,” which translates variously as “man’s desire is to be desired by the Other,” “man’s desire is for the Other to desire him,” or “man desires the Other’s desire for him” (Fink 238, n11). Desire is thus never one’s own, insofar as it is what the Other desires (that is, one internalizes what is assumed to be the desire of the Other). One models the desiring of the Other at the same time that one wishes to be the object of the Other’s desiring. Technically speaking, I should add here that the big Other, denoted with the capital “O,” represents the Symbolic and the unconscious, while the little other, denoted with a lower-case “o,” represents another person “like me.” For more detail on the complexities of this distinction, see (Lundberg; and Gunn, “On Dead Subjects”).


[20] Notably, this example demonstrates why we cannot reduce demagoguery to scapegoating: here the “outgroup” is actually the “ingroup”—that is, the audience at this luncheon can presumably include the “they” Huey is joking about. What seems more fundamental is not the “they” (which is ultimately interchangeable; for Huey it was sometimes the existing political regime, sometimes the law itself, sometimes “the rich,” and so on) but “the way,” that is, how Huey stimulates the desire of the audience with the promise of love.

[21] This object is the symbolic phallus, which, again, owing to length constraints and the complexity of the theory, I leave for another essay (see Lacan, “[The Meaning](#)”). It should be noted, however, that Lacanian psychoanalysis provides us with a nonessentialist category of “structure” that can help to explain why the demagogue is typically a man but also in a way that maintains that such an association is socially constructed and, therefore, open to change or rupture. Although from its inception psychoanalysis has pursued the relationship between the cultural (gender) and biological (sex)—indeed, sexuality and sexual differentiation is central to every school of psychoanalysis—some scholars argue that it was Lacan who once and for all jettisoned the biological basis for understanding sex (Mitchell 382–398; Rose 27–57). Others have strongly disagreed: Judith Butler has argued that Lacan’s understanding of sex leads him into a “tautological bind” (87), and Luce Irigaray has argued that Lacan merely elevates the masculine to the status of the universal (“phallogocentrism” [see *Speculum*]). In *Arguing with the Phallus*, Jan Campbell provides a well-written account of the various ways in which this debate has been staged (see especially 19–47, 102–128, and 147–157).
Arguably, these structures are related to the literature in our field on “masculine” and “feminine” style. Although it is certainly the case that one can specify and locate masculine and feminine rhetorical constructs in contemporary discourse, the long association of the mythic figure of the Southern orator with, as Waldo Braden put it, “emotional histrionics,” calls into question the assumption that male orators only began to embrace feminine styles in response to the intimate logics of television in contemporary, “postmodern” campaigns (Braden 17; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 337). At least in caricature, the oratory of the Southern demagogue of the Old and New South embodied the features Kathleen Hall Jamieson identifies as stylistically effeminate: feminine style is “personal, excessive, disorganized, and unduly ornamental” (76) and, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has argued, is also inductive, participatory, and addressed to an audience of peers (13). Evidence of the male use of feminine style in the age of the telegraph and radio serves only to underscore that, despite a general, well-recognized “essentialist” tendency to associate gendered styles with the biological sex of the rhetor, most scholars who employ the concepts of masculine and feminine styles believe that they are protean and mobile. Indeed, it is precisely the belief that gendered styles are cultural constructions that enables men to appropriate “feminine” style for ideological ends: as Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles have persuasively argued, it is more frequently the case that the contemporary use of feminine style does the work of hegemonic masculinity, masking the “patriarchy of contemporary politics” (348). In light of the antessentialist understanding of gendered styles, we need to consider whether their continued use as a critical category is as helpful or revealing as the analysis of something more fundamental yet something that is not reducible to biological sex. I submit that a shift from a focus on style to psychical structures helps to explain the persistence of the patriarchal despite the mobility styles.

There is actually a third: phobia. However, phobic structures are not subject structures like obsession and hysteria and operate rather as a kind of threshold for obsession, hysteria, and perversion (see Fink 163–164). Another way to think about psychical structures is in terms of mood disorders. Many readers are likely familiar with print and television advertisements for the litany of mood-altering drugs on the market today, which claim to alleviate the symptoms of a rapidly multiplying number of mental problems: from pre-and post-menstrual syndromes to adult attention deficit disorder to panic attacks and depression, one pharmaceutical company or another has a pill for it. Lacan elegantly simplifies this contemporary explosion of disorders, syndromes, and complexes by arguing they are all symptoms or traces of a limited number of deeper, psychical structures of subjectivity that form in early childhood (Evans 194–195). This is not to say there is no biological basis for mood disorders. If a biological basis exists for a given mood disorder, however, the symptom will be articulated in a meaningful manner to a psychical structure and therefore the symbolic and social structures.

For a description of the symptoms of obsession, see Laplanche and Pontalis 281–282.

Incidentally, obsessives are particularly prone to the virgin-whore dialectic, another reason that Mel Gibson will eventually be destroyed, at least symbolically, for his epic The Passion of the Christ (2004).

For a description of the symptoms of hysterical neurosis, see Laplanche and Pontalis 195–196.


I should be careful to underscore here that by characterizing demagoguery as neurosis, I do not mean to pathologize the discourse, but quite the opposite. Insofar as a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity holds that none of us are “normal,” then demagoguery becomes a more conspicuous or pronounced example of persuasive oratory in general. In other words, while we are attempting to account for the reasons why orators such as
Huey Long were persuasive and successful, there is an important sense in which the psychoanalytic theory of demagoguery explains persuasion in general as a strategy of desire. Indeed, not only are obsession and hysteria structures, but they can also be understood as strategies designed to keep desire in play; the neuroses are processes that work against their own closure, which is what happens when one becomes “fixated” on some object (See Fink 51).

I have developed this position elsewhere in terms of “the transference” (Gunn, “Refitting”).

The reason that Long’s life unfolded like a Hollywood film is precisely because the role of the demagogue, like that of a powerful parent, is scripted in the popular imaginary. Ken Burns’ America Collection documentary, Huey Long (PBS Home Video, 1985), provides a number of stark examples. The film opens with footage of Long on the stump, which is followed by a series of interviews. Three separate elderly and visibly poor individuals share their loving feelings about Long, describing him as “swell” and worthy of much admiration. These scenes are followed by shots of an older woman who proclaims she cannot think of a “Saturday night... when we didn’t talk about killing Huey Long.” Later interviewees would claim Huey “had to die.”

I would be remiss not to note that the Real as an empty category explains theoretically why no one ever gets what they desire: the Real, that which is betokened by the objet a, is a gap in the symbolic. Although we may mistake it as something primordial, it nevertheless does not exist as meaningful.

We can, of course, explain such ambivalence by suggesting that Long represented a father figure, a disciplinarian to some and a provider to others. Nevertheless, such a characterization of demagoguery is unfair to the scholarship of Braden, Logue, Dorgan, and others who understood what Cash termed “the Southern Mind.” A review of the introduction of Logue and Dorgan’s The Oratory of Southern Demagogues does not comport with Hogan and William’s “stereotype,” nor do its many essays evince the sort of “elitism” that they decry (in fact, the study of southern oratory spearheaded by Waldo Braden at LSU was dedicated to both dispelling and explaining the persistence of southern stereotypes).

Yet, as I argued earlier, there is no consensus among scholars concerning such “definitive” characteristics. This argument is a straw-person (see Logue and Dorgan 1–11).

They set up the passage, “Long’s gift for emotional appeal was legendary,” but presume the passage is self-evident. This kind of analysis is representative of how rhetoricians have typically dealt with the emotional appeal (as self-evident). What’s missing from our account of the emotional appeal in rhetorical studies is a theory of desire—an explanation of what fuels the emotional engine.

“Other than specifying that he wanted a tower, Huey Long did not intervene in the design of the capitol. He trusted the architects and gave them a free hand to work out the specifics” (Kubly 17).

Hogan and Williams argue that those scholars who label Long a demagogue are really resorting to a cultural bias and elitist stereotyping, and this is because they (or “we”) are uncomfortable with “radical mass politics among poor, uneducated rural folk in the south” (“Rusticity” 151). The charge amounts to calling those who continue to find the term “demagogue” a useful one for describing Long arrogant, bourgeois, and lazy. This move is an ad hominem in the service of a straw-person argument. Reading the literature on Long and demagoguery, it is clear the authors—most especially T. Harry Williams—are trying to describe the emotional readiness of Louisiana’s poor for charismatic leadership, not their stupidity or class. Similarly, I have attempted to show in this article how hardship can be quickly yoked to a subject position of hysteria and a circuit of desire established that has little to do with one’s intellect.

In this respect, the answer given to the question of Huey (indeed, all neurotics model a question) is indeed death, an answer entirely consistent with the structure of obsession.
Lacan suggests that each neurotic structure has a corresponding question in respect to identity. For the hysteric, that question is "what am I, a man or a woman?" For the obsessive, that question is Hamlet's: "to be, or not to be?" Extreme obsessives, in their rituals and compulsive assertions of being, always tempt death (see Lacan, Seminar III 195–182).

[38] Carole Blair argues similarly for the criticism of monuments and museums in general (see 271–294).

[39] The call is for a "posthumanist" perspective on rhetoric (see Biesecker 140–241; Gunn, "Mourning"; and Stormer 257–284).

References


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