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ABSTRACT

A mythic interpretive framework can explain how the use of an uncontested term--a word which "seems to invite a contest, but which apparently is not so regarded in its own context"--is legitimated and perpetuated. By examining John C. Calhoun's nullification rhetoric as a case study of political myth (specifically his "Disquisition on Government" and Senate speeches opposing the Force Bill), this persuasive character of myth comes more clearly into focus. Arguing for the nullification of the Federal Government, Calhoun's rhetoric evoked the mythic elements of absolute good and evil, conspiracy, and heroes and redemption. Political myths such as these channel audiences' actions, particularly through the use of uncontested terms, and can therefore become grounds for action as well as belief. Critical judgments of rhetorical dynamics should be based as much on mythically and narratively generated insight as on historical hindsight. (Thirty references are appended.) (MM)

Political Myth and Social Action: John C. Calhoun's Defense of Nullification

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Richard Weaver defines an uncontested term as a word which "seems to invite a contest, but which apparently is not so regarded in its own context" (166). Uncontested terms emerge in rhetorical artifacts as imprecisely defined abstractions which nonetheless bear persuasive potency. Weaver contends that the frequent appearance of uncontested terms in nineteenth-century American public address makes such rhetoric seem alien to modern analysts. Weaver suggests that the prevalence of uncontested terms stems from investing orators with power to act as moral guardians for the public, a power due at least partially to the "substratum of agreement" which "makes possible the panoramic treatment" typical of uncontested terms (183, 171). Weaver, however, indicates that this agreement characterizes a particular phase of a society's development (171) and does not explore the role uncontested terms play in political myths.

The assumption that the use of uncontested terms derives from the authority invested in rhetors might have some foundation; however, I propose that the relationship between uncontested terms and their employment is more complex. In this essay, I contend that adoption of a mythic interpretive framework explains how the use of uncontested terms is legitimated and perpetuated. Specifically, John C.

Calhoun's nullification rhetoric not only represents a site wherein uncontested terms occur, but it also shows how these terms perform the concrete function of reinforcing the myth Calhoun offers. The relationship between uncontested terms and their mythic contexts is, therefore, symbiotic. Myths generate uncontested terms as argumentative *topoi*, while the uncontested terms induce audiences to adopt a particular myth as the correct account of the world in which they dwell. My analysis of the relationship between uncontested terms and myth proceeds in two steps. First, I examine how Calhoun portrays characters and events mythically. Next, I explore how such rhetorical techniques induce collective action.

Before continuing, a remark about the rhetorical artifacts is necessary. My analysis of Calhoun's nullification rhetoric includes his *Disquisition on Government* and Senate speeches opposing the Force Bill. The documents are particularly appropriate for the task at hand. the speeches against the Force Bill[1] lay the theoretical

1. The so-called Force Bill was proposed to Congress on 21 January 1833. The bill gave the President explicit power to employ force to execute federal revenue laws and to extend the jurisdiction of federal courts to permit prosecution of revenue law violations. These measures were proposed in response to the refusal in some quarters, especially in South Carolina, to enforce the tariff laws, particularly the lax application of the 1828 tariff.

Calhoun emphasizes that his arguments must be understood in light of the Force Bill's historical context: "Without a full understanding of the events of this period, from 1824 down to the present time, it is impossible that we can have a just knowledge of the cause of our present condition, or a clear perception of the means of remedying it" (*Speeches* 392).

foundation for nullification, explaining how Calhoun conceives the Constitution as a compact between sovereign states. The *Disquisition* is Calhoun's most developed treatment of political theory. Together, the speeches and prose provide a concise, yet representative, picture of Calhoun's political outlook during his second tenure in the Senate.[2]

Calhoun's Mythic Vision

Two caveats should be borne in mind when treating Calhoun's nullification rhetoric as myth. First, Calhoun by no means originates or has the last word on the mythic elements or uncontested terms he employs. As will be seen later, much of the rhetorical effectiveness of mythic narratives depends on using and elaborating ideological and cultural traditions familiar to audiences. In fact, most of the ideas in Calhoun's nullification discourse closely parallel recurrent themes in Antifederalist writings (cf. Lucas 60-151). Political myths also generate further myths as elaborations, reinforcements, or refutations of their

2. Although the *Disquisition* was not published until 1852, it was probably completed c. 1849 (see Levy's introduction to the *Disquisition*). A sixteen year gap between the first of the Force Bill speeches and Calhoun's book might appear excessive, but it is clear that Calhoun had been working on the *Disquisition* several years prior to its completion. It is important to understand that the *Disquisition* summarized Calhoun's political theory, so it elaborated on the themes found in the Force Bill speeches. There is no indication that any substantially new ideas were included in the *Disquisition* to supplant the thoughts expressed in the Force Bill speeches of 1833 and 1834. The Force Bill speeches were delivered on 15-16 February 1833. Calhoun also delivered a speech on 9 April 1834 supporting a bill to repeal the Force Bill once it had been passed.

predecessors (Bennett & Edelman 165). The rhetoric I examine in this essay, therefore, properly represents merely a segment of ongoing discourse.

The second caveat is that the reader should not seek a stipulative definition of *myth* in the analysis that follows. I do not venture to propose that a particular set of characteristics constitutes necessary and sufficient criteria for any discourse to qualify as myth. Exceptions to such definitions always can be found, and preconceived definitions invariably fail to account for all instances of mythic rhetoric. Instead of arguing why one definition is superior, I will identify several characteristics of Calhoun's nullification rhetoric that should suffice to classify it as mythic. I take a cue from Propp (4-5) and Frye (6-7), who suggest that the characteristics of a work should be gleaned from the work itself. This approach allows me to avoid superimposing strict criteria for myth on discourse that might be unsuited for such an analysis. Although my procedure might sacrifice some orientational consistency, it allows Calhoun's rhetoric to enrich and be enriched by a variety of perspectives.

Myths characteristically endow sequences of events with a definite form, typically a narrative so that the myth can be preserved by retelling (van der Leeuw 411). Calhoun tells how events fit into a pattern that can be explained and understood. He claims the events leading to his nullification stance form a narrative (*Speeches* 392).

Calhoun reasons that the course of events in America had taken a rapid turn for the worse, especially after 1816 (*Speeches* 211-214). Early usurpations of state powers led "to abuse and future difficulties" (*Speeches* 212) that Calhoun had foreseen but not deemed sufficient to arrest. The 1828 tariff, "that bill of abominations" (*Speeches* 213), prompted Calhoun to take action, including formulating a way to rationalize governmental action as a whole while providing a contextual framework for his decision to embark on the path to nullification. The specific components of Calhoun's rhetoric merit more detailed attention.

Villains

Calhoun polarizes his rhetorical world: concurrent majorities are wholly good; absolute majorities utterly evil. This portrayal fits the pattern Edelman identifies as typifying political myths. A threat is identified with a hostile opponent, and the opposition between good and evil is unambiguous (Edelman 19). As Bennett and Edelman observe, political narratives create social worlds (159). These social realities unfold by specifying heroes and villains in order to propound a particular political ideology.

The mutually exclusive heroes and villains in Calhoun's rhetoric exemplify the simplification of conflict Frye associates with mythic romance. Frye observes that "the nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy will

take on demonic mythical qualities" (187). Furthermore, the characters in romances are seen as personifications of goodness or evil. Frye's comments on characterization in quest romances apply equally to the clear-cut choice Calhoun offers his audiences: "[S]ubtlety and complexity are not much favored. Characters tend to be either for or against the quest. If they assist it they are idealized as simply gallant and pure; if they obstruct it they are caricatured as simply villainous or cowardly" (Frye 195).

Calhoun's nullification rhetoric does not fit perfectly into the category of mythic romance, since it does not progress through the six plot phases of quest romances (cf. Frye 198-203). Nonetheless, a convenient means of conveying the unidimensional aspect of mythic characters would be to describe them in absolute terms admitting no exceptions or degrees, i.e. the portrayal itself would be uncontested. The simplified contrast Calhoun offers not only facilitates choice between political (and narrative) alternatives, but also reassures audiences. The threat to the nation and the potential for moral "corruption and debasement" (*Disquisition* 49, 51) through poor government are accounted for and remediable.

All political evil flows from absolute or numerical majorities, the "fruitful source of woes" (*Speeches* 387, 392). Calhoun associates such governmental policy with a specific agent, the northern states. The North not only becomes the object of Calhoun's wrath, but is identified

with what Weaver would call uncontested devil-terms (167, 222-227). The devil-terms of nullification are consistent, and almost always appear in the context of discussions concerning absolute majorities. Calhoun describes Daniel Webster's "scheme of a perfect government" (note the conspiratorial overtones), comprised of a union of states with a powerful central government acting on the will of the majority, as one which "though often tried, has invariable failed,--has always run, whenever tried, through the same uniform process of faction, corruption, anarchy, and despotism" (*Speeches* 306). Calhoun explains this sequence of events not as an undesirable trait of the opposition, but as an historically proven and logically necessary progression to greater evils. Faction had conjured images of governmental destruction at least since Madison expressed the evils of factions in Federalist 10.

Two of Calhoun's other rhetorical enemies are anarchy and despotism. If a state's right to abrogate legislation perceived as unconstitutional were denied, the only peace remaining would be "the peace of despotism: that peace which is enforced by the bayonet and the sword; the peace of death, where all the vital functions of liberty have ceased" (*Speeches* 303; cf. *Speeches* 229). Consolidation would "terminate, finally, in a military despotism" (*Speeches* 405). Calhoun considers too obvious for proof the assumption that "all consolidated governments...are necessarily despotic..." (*Speeches* 386-387). As for the Force Bill, it

is "monstrous and despotic" (*Speeches* 203), a description treating monstrosity and despotism as allied evils and perversions of nature. The bill falls into the category of one of the "most cruel and despotic acts ever" (*Speeches* 233), where linking cruelty with despotism simultaneously associates tolerance and moderation with opposition to the Force Bill.

Anarchy represents, for Calhoun, the ultimate danger. Concurrent majorities, where political decisions would be made only when consensual agreement would arise among homogeneous groups, would "avoid anarchy, the greatest of all evils" (*Disquisition* 38). He adds: "No necessity can be more urgent and imperious, than that of avoiding anarchy" (*Disquisition* 38-39). Calhoun refers to anarchy as "the greatest of all curses" (*Disquisition* 54), a danger requiring extraordinary powers to prevent, a force which could destroy society (*Disquisition* 52, 53). Anarchy could be considered the devil-term of most severe censure, and Calhoun carefully uses it as a correlate or direct result of maintaining a strong central government operating with absolute majorities.

Use of devil-terms does not itself constitute a myth, but Calhoun's conjunction of these devil-terms with a specific political position associated with the Force Bill establishes numerical majorities and centralized government as clear villains. The Force Bill becomes the latest act of villainy by a government personified as evil itself. To

this extent, Calhoun's attribution of evil to a specific agent, i.e. the federal government and particularly Andrew Jackson (cf. *Speeches* 215-219), qualifies as the single element Propp considers essential to all folk narratives (Propp 91-92). According to Propp, once a specific act of villainy has been identified, a host of plot moves, such as introduction of the hero, logically can follow. Although Calhoun does not follow precisely the logical format Propp identifies in Russian fairy tales, Calhoun's introduction of a villain represents a necessary first step toward resolution. The specific means for improving the country's deplorable condition develop from the need for a redemptive or heroic response to the evils perpetrated by the North. The solution Calhoun proposes, nullification, can appear against this background of motivation as a just retort to provocation instead of as unwarranted extremism.

Conspiracy

For Calhoun, the conspiratorial argument has a more important role than simply impugning the opposition's motives. Calhoun places the history of federal tariffs and intervention into state affairs in an explanatory teleological pattern. Each new federal encroachment on the reserved powers of the states draws the government one step closer to the epitome of evil summarized by means of the devil-terms. The sequence of events holds true for all governments. Calhoun makes no attempt to substantiate his accusations of conspiracy. Infringement by the executive

branch on the states' reserved powers simply leads to despotism "by a law as necessary, as resistless, and inevitable, as that which governs the movements of the solar system" (*Speeches* 399-400).

This grand progression toward destruction describes a scenario in which past, present, and future events can be explained. In this way, Calhoun interprets history through his rhetorical lens. The wide scope of Calhoun's account qualifies his tale as a political myth, since political myths, as "symbolic stories of the whole," attempt to explain and predict a broad range of past and possible political occurrences (McGee & Nelson 152-153). Calhoun's rhetoric becomes a filter through which past, present, and future events gain their significance. Fisher summarizes this effect by commenting that compelling stories "not only constrain behavior, they may also determine it" (364). Calhoun's narrative serves not only as a warrant for action, but as the arena within which action takes place. Calhoun's nullification rhetoric constructs a world of events as much as it represents an attempt to account for the sequence of events in political history (see Cassirer, *Language* 15). The explanation of political history and destiny by means of a coherent narrative fulfills the predictive function

Simon (15) recognizes in political myths. Nothing seems

occur randomly. The inherent tendency of absolute

ties to corruption accounts for all faults in social

organizations.

As for the current state of affairs, Calhoun fits them neatly into a consistent pattern of consolidation. This concentration of power was most apparent in the 1828 tariff and in the Force Bill, measures providing a dangerous precedent for future erosion of state rights. Calhoun considers the Force Bill "as chains forged and filled to the limbs of the states, and hung up to be used when occasion may require" (*Speeches* 307). The government had been advancing to power with "rapid strides" that necessitated retaliatory action (*Speeches* 308). Southerners should attend vigilantly to "the danger which menaces us from this new quarter," since the Force Bill or future measures like it could become "a pretext to interfere with our political affairs and domestic institutions in a manner infinitely more dangerous than any other power which has ever been exercised on the part of the General Government" (*Speeches* 308).

Calhoun, however, employs devices to extend his narrative beyond contemporary usurpations of reserved powers. The specter of disaster haunts numerical majorities even if catastrophe remains latent:

> The government would gradually pass from the hands of the majority of the party into those of its leaders; as the struggle became more intense, and the honors and emoluments of the government the all-absorbing objects. At this stage, principles and policy would lose all influence in the

> elections; and cunning, falsehood, deception, slander, fraud, and most worthless portions of the community, would take the place of sound reason and wise debate. (*Disquisition* 41-42)

Locating the source of villainy in the character of government itself rather than in specific agents allows the story to continue even if disaster does not result from the Force Bill. As Propp explains, the *dramatis personae* of a narrative might change, but the functions they perform remain constant (79). These functions, for Calhoun, could be filled by any future event that might curb state sovereignty. Calhoun claims that "the genius of consolidation will again exhibit itself; but in what form...it is not for me to say..." (*Speeches* 4; cf. 377). Calhoun indicates that the tendency toward concentration of power in "fewer and fewer hands" stems "from a necessity inherent in the nature of such governments" relying on numerical majorities (*Disquisition* 40-41). Until government on the basis of concurrent majorities is adopted, the source of evil will remain. Calhoun plays on the danger of this potential, arguing that "a bad precedent is as dangerous as a bad measure itself; and in some respects more so, since it may give rise to acts far worse than itself..." (*Speeches* 378).

The same logic explains successes and failures of past governments. Oppression of minorities in Rome due to the plebian/patrician division led to the empire's downfall.

The harsh Roman system "could not be endured. The natural consequences followed. Deep hatred was engendered between the orders, accompanied by factions, violence, and corruption, which distracted and weakened the government" (*Disquisition* 93; cf. *Speeches* 305). The sequence from numerical majority to governmental decay is "natural," i.e. the procedure operates as an unquestioned or uncontested process leading to horrors described by familiar devil-term clusters. In another example, the twelve tribes of Israel, when consolidated under King Solomon's rule, began to suffer from "discontent and complaint," the "natural consequences" of taxation (*Speeches* 244-245). Refusal to repeal the excessive taxes despite the wishes of ten tribes sundered the tribal union.

The conspiracy theme as a warrant for immediate action by an offended party constitutes an essential element of Calhoun's case. Zarefsky argues that allegations of conspiracy in the Lincoln-Douglas debates "tell a story which is vivid and plausible" (168). Calhoun's conspiracy arguments with their historical examples of how power had been usurped, plus the metaphysical assertion that such usurpation must occur, morally and logically legitimize the protagonist's actions.

The conspiracy argument is also irrefutable, since attempts at denial would reinforce charges of a cover-up (cf. Zarefsky 168). The conspiracy motif allows Calhoun's narrative to disqualify as part of a deceptive plot

generated by consolidators any information which might be incompatible with Calhoun's view of government. This pre-emption typifies the mythic tendency to explain away discordant information by incorporating it into the mythic framework (Edelman 43).

Heroes and Redemption

A persistent pattern of abuses cannot be ignored, and Calhoun employs the trend of evil as a warrant for introducing the hero. Calhoun argues from signs that the central government has begun and must remain on the path to ultimate destruction. The South must be petitioned for protection from the tentacles of central government (*Speeches* 301), so the South automatically assumes the role of protagonist. Southerners had "contended for more than thirteen years" against incursions on states' rights (*Speeches* 301). The protagonist assumes the role of the underdog battling almost insurmountable odds:

> But of what possible avail could the strict construction of the minor party be, against the liberal interpretations of the major, when the one would have all the powers of government to carry its construction into effect,--and the other be deprived of all means of enforcing its construction? (*Disquisition* 33)

The conflict between federal consolidation and state sovereignty is "apparently insuperable" and will require the best efforts of policymakers to overcome the seemingly

"resistless" waves of centralized power (*Speeches* 386). The protagonist must put itself to the test now, lest further centralization of power erode any chance of successful resistance.

The protagonist, through the agency of nullification, plays a redemptive role. The redemptive aspect of Calhoun's rhetoric recalls another facet of mythic romance: the Messianic character of the hero. The redeemer is analogous to a deliverer who saves the world from damnation (Frye 187). The South, particularly South Carolina, brandishes the sword of righteousness against the onslaught of federal power. The moral integrity of South Carolina's cause follows directly from the conspiracy theme:

> [T]he attempt is now made to hold up Carolina as responsible for the whole system of protection which has since followed [the 1816 tariff], though she has resisted its progress in every stage. Was there ever greater injustice? And how is it to be accounted for, but as forming a part of that systematic misrepresentation and calumny which has been directed for so many years, without interruption, against that gallant and generous state? (*Speeches* 206)

In a similar vein, Calhoun counters charges that his state has acted rashly by characterizing South Carolina as the guardian of morality. The accusations against South Carolina come from "an interested majority, who, by means of

this unconstitutional and oppressive system, are annually extorting millions from the South" (*Speeches* 223). Calhoun adds that nullification would "impede the course of avarice and ambition" corrupting the central government (*Speeches* 223). South Carolina must protect itself against "this dangerous and growing disease" of Northern oppression, "whose cancerous action would soon have spread to every part of the system, if not arrested" (*Speeches* 224).

Calhoun prophesies further moral degradation should redemptive action not be taken. Until South Carolina had clarified its doctrine of state rights,

> the country had sunk into avarice, intrigue, and electioneering--from which nothing but some such event [as nullification] could rouse it, or restore those honest and patriotic feelings which had almost disappeared under their baneful influence. (*Speeches* 304)

In this passage Calhoun invokes hopes of restoring "that once beautiful system" (*Speeches* 385) of a confederated government. Such a desire to restore the beauty and harmony of the past enacts what Frye calls the "extraordinarily persistent nostalgia" of the quest romance, "its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space" (186). Calhoun's prophesies of doom raise the possibility for expunging the evil. If consolidation were the true source of societal decay, then such a revelation "is, in reality, our only consolation--[it] furnishes the only hope that can

be rationally entertained of extracting ourselves from our present calamity, and of averting the still greater that are impending" (*Speeches* 388). Since the morality of a central government also reflects the moral character of the citizenry (*Disquisition* 49), the battle against debased governments is simultaneously a struggle for moral rectitude.

The occurrence of these uncontested terms not only justifies understanding Calhoun's nullification rhetoric as mythic, but also demonstrates the role such terms play as mediators between ideology and myth. McGee contends that the manipulation of power and structuring of reality are not solely the function of evolving political institutions. Rather, the formulation and refinement of political realities is evidenced and often accomplished by shorthand ultimate terms (McGee 3-4, 7). McGee calls these symbols ideographs because, like Chinese symbols, the terms themselves suffice to indicate an entire orientation or mode of encountering reality (McGee 7). I shall proceed to discuss the specific social functions of Calhoun's political myth, functions most conveniently approached by means of ideographs (see McGee 8).

Myths as Catalysts for Social Action

I now turn to the implications Calhoun's rhetoric has for political myths. In this section, I examine how political myths channel audiences' actions, particularly through the use of uncontested terms. I do not claim that

myths must or have become catalysts for social change; I wish simply to explain how myths can become grounds for *doing* as well as for believing.

Ingredients of Effective Political Myths

The rhetorical effectiveness of Calhoun's political myth should not be judged solely by its number of converts. If the criterion of mythic success is tangible results, then Calhoun failed. The Force Bill passed, it was not repealed, and supporters of state sovereignty remained a minority in the Senate. Calhoun's myth does not necessarily comprise the only device to propound state sovereignty, but it reflects and perhaps induces persistent and pervasive beliefs. In Calhoun's time, enough people clung to the beliefs manifested in Calhoun's rhetoric to go to war at least partly on the bases of such principles.

In what sense is Calhoun's myth successful? Calhoun's discourse demonstrates how the interpretive latitude allowed by uncontested terms can engender widespread adherence to the principles these terms embody. Lentricchia, referring to Kenneth Burke's appropriation of 'the people' as the central term for American Marxism, summarizes the persuasive potential of fluid terms: "The fluidity, or undecidability, of the symbol is not, therefore, the sign of its social and political elusiveness but the ground of its historicity and of its flexible but also specific political significance and force" (34). The specific significance of Calhoun's uncontested terms can be gleaned from their function in the

political narrative. The flexibility of these terms lies in their ability to be manipulated in accordance with their connotative associations. As mentioned earlier, any *dramatis personae* can fulfill an assigned function in a mythic narrative, as long as the audience shares a common notion of what role the character must perform (cf.Eliade 432-434).

The appearance and use of uncontested terms do not suffice to assure a political myth's success. In order to be compelling, a myth should offer to audiences a vision of the world they would desire to inhabit. Successful political rhetoric invites audiences to participate in the myth, to act as if the myth were true. In this sense, mythic political narratives perform a task common to other symbolic gestures, such as metaphors. Myths, like metaphors, invite audiences to accept a prospective reality (cf. Cohen 6).

Uncontested terms, in the context of myth, suspend critical judgment by eroding the subject-object dichotomy through which interpretation becomes possible. The breadth of mythic language and the universality of mythic applicability render difficult or impossible the assumption of a position 'outside' the myth. In short, critical distance is virtually unattainable as long as what I shall term mythic closure is in effect. This mythic closure subsumes all lived experience within the confines of mythic explanations. The closure phenomenon is analogous to what

Gadamer calls "the medial nature of the play process" (98). Play "fulfills its purpose" when it draws the player into its realm "and fills him with its spirit" so that the player "loses himself in his play" (Gadamer 92, 98). Myths envelop their participants, so a myth is not seen as an 'other' that can be accepted or rejected, but as the meaningful structure of life itself.

If Calhoun's proposed correctives, state sovereignty and nullification, are--as historians claim--vague abstractions permitting a variety of interpretations (Peterson 61-62; Current 114), then Calhoun's nullification rhetoric can be approached as a metaphysical vision or as sloppy argumentation. Dismissing the significance of Calhoun's rhetoric due to its vagueness is risky, however, because linguistic specificity does not count as a prime virtue in mythic contexts. Calhoun's simplified versions of redeemers, villains, and causality by malevolent design can account, with minor additions and specifications, for all events in American political history. Calhoun argues that the Constitution is a compact because states must and should be sovereign because of the nature of government itself (Coit 254). The argument here is not simply an appeal to tradition, but implies that acceptance of the compact theory of the Constitution entails acceptance of the entire myth. The converse could also hold true: accepting the compact theory depends on a presupposed construction of political reality. Calhoun often contends "that if only his listeners

knew the facts, they would recognize and accept his point of view" (Bradley 413).

For Calhoun and those who accept his viewpoint, as for cultures who worship symbols of nature, history "hangs together, everything is connected, and makes up a cosmic whole" (Eliade 156). No evidence can count as disproving the myth once the basic assumption of constitutional compact has been accepted. Uncontested terms permit no refutation, not because they have strong logical support, but because they are not amenable to logical dissection (see McGee 13). The generality of uncontested terms and the "metaphysical cobwebs" (Perry 235) of Calhoun's myth do not allow for criticism unless the critic departs from the epistemic framework (how knowledge is obtained and what counts as knowledge) offered by the myth. In other words, acquiescence to the myth involves not simply agreement, but immersion in the mythic version of reality.

Identification

A successful political myth, or any myth for that matter, would allow individuals to lose themselves in the mythic narrative. The myth becomes not only the true account of past events, but the framework within which present and future actions occur. Particular actions can be understood and evaluated in terms of the behavioral and intellectual action guides expressed in the myth (Burke, *Philosophy* 428). In this sense, myths act as templates for assigning meaning to human events.

The absorption of an audience in myth transforms observers into participants, much like Ortega characterizes romantic love as a combination of enchantment and surrender. Participants in myth allow themselves to become "absorbed" in the myth, as if it "had torn us from our own vital depths and we were living transplanted, our vital roots within" it (Ortega 174). Absorption allows for mythic participants to surrender their individuality and define themselves, formulate their own identities in terms of the myth (Edelman 6).[3] Pursuing the comparison with Ortega, it appears that one of the most effective ways to induce political conformity is to seduce the audience, to make it unwilling,

3. Despite my agreement with Edelman that political myths play an important role in creating and reinforcing individual and social identity, I am less eager to embrace wholeheartedly his psychological linkage of myths to hidden desires and anxieties (cf. Edelman 66-71). Edelman's explanation seems to owe a debt to the notion that myths serve as wish-fulfillments or as emotional outlets. I feel content with explaining that such identification occurs without venturing into its psychological causation. Such causative hypotheses are notoriously difficult to prove.

My description of immersion in myth need not imply that this absorption operates to the same degree for everyone; clearly, some myths are rejected. On the other hand, such uncritical absorption would account for the persistent hold some myths maintain on apparently rational people despite the myths' falsity and, at times, perniciousness. It is instructive that we speak of a lover's irrational behavior as symptomatic of being 'lost in love'. Witness the willingness with which members of religious sects, such as those led by Jim Jones, blithely followed their leader to their mythic narrative's fateful conclusion. The same unconditional obeisance was used in the film *Poltergeist II* to explain the disquietude of former cult members: surrender to the apocalyptic vision of a leader led to the congregation's underground entombment. It might also prove useful to explore the relationship between such uncritical acceptance of myth and the type of quasi-magical transport Longinus attributes to the sublime.

even if not unable, to resist the myth. In Calhoun's case, if audiences accept the equation, indeed the merged identity, of positive values (order, liberty, redemption, moral rectitude) with state sovereignty, then they have gone a long way toward accepting the myth as a whole. The univocal emotive connotations of uncontested terms, plus their vagueness, allow audiences to link themselves unconditionally with the forces of goodness--state sovereignty and concurrent majorities.

Calhoun's rhetoric exemplifies mythic identification. Calhoun attempts to link the theory of concurrent majorities with traditional heroes and authorities: Burlamaqui, the British constitution, the ratifying conventions of Massachusetts and Virginia, and James Madison (*Speeches* 274-277, 286-289, 296-299). In each of these appeals, Calhoun specifically appropriates the authority figure as an example of interpreting the Constitution as a compact between sovereign states. Such appropriation serves two purposes. First, participation in Calhoun's myth would establish kinship between the participant and the authorities, thus identifying the believer with the wisdom and heroism attached to constitutional ratifiers and national leaders. Identification forges links between believers and their common past, thus strengthening emotional bonds that unify a political group (Cassirer, *Myth* 40). If someone were to believe the Constitution a compact, then that individual, in Calhoun's myth, would become a participant in a long line of

historical tradition dating back at .east tc the Magna Carta.

Consequently, Calhoun's nullification rhetoric plays an important role Edelman assigns to political myths. Identification with the heroes in Calhoun's story supplies a self-concept for participants in the myth (see Edelman 14). The more Calhoun's followers identify themselves with shared roots in Anglo-American history and legal tradition, the fewer opportunities arise for faction. Lentricchia summarizes this phenomenon by remarking that the "primary lure of all myths of collectivity is that they ask people to yield to...the desire to give ourselves to something beyond our isolate[d] individual existences" (24). Ultimately, if identification were stressed strongly enough, individuality would disappear as everyone would be subsumed in a tradition (cf. Burke, *Rhetoric* 20-23). This possibility represents the logical extreme of mythically induced group identity.

Calhoun's rhetoric also simplifies complex constitutional arguments into a struggle between goodness and evil. Calhoun, by rationalizing past and future political events, provides a means for consensus-building common in political myths (Cuthbertson 221). Once audiences are presented with a reasonable explanation of apparently chaotic political events, they have a focal point upon which to unify their support. Support for Calhoun's position need have no ground other than a desire to identify with traditional American ideographs, such as order (avoiding

anarchy) and liberty (freedom from despotism). Calhoun's investiture of state sovereignty with qualities revered by Americans allows "all the reader's values" to be "bound up with the hero" (Frye 187).

Ideographic Grounds for Political Action

If the genealogy of Calhoun's uncontested terms could be traced, their common ancestor might be found in the ideograph *liberty*. Summarizing the confrontation between North and South, Calhoun remarks: "It is a great struggle between power and liberty--power on the side of the North, and liberty on the side of the South" (*Speeches* 121). Calhoun invokes two of the fundamental ideographs specified in the Constitution when he comments that the Force Bill would be "fatal to the liberty and happiness of the country" (*Speeches* 376). If Calhoun's uncontested terms do extend the sentiments and assumptions of a discursive community summarized in these ideographs, then Calhoun's rhetoric exemplifies how ideographs can encourage unification for collective action. Calhoun's vocabulary identifies and helps constitute a collectivity, and collective unity behind a commitment facilitates social action, be this action a change or an entrenchment of the status quo (see McGee 8, 15). Antagonistic factions might bury the hatchet temporarily to establish a coalition to advance what they perceive to be the cause of righteousness, liberty, justice, etc. Voegelin claims that acceptance of a social order, especially if that order is seen as part of a metaphysical

order, instigates "a society's common understanding of its own order; this understanding makes it a people and enables it to move as one body, if it accepts its order as the *right* order" (Sebba 660).

A two-fold potential for abuse lurks in such unity. acceptance of a political myth as a metaphysical order could be used to justify an interpretive hegemony, a conversion of 'outsiders' to 'the faith'. Another caveat to remember is that ideographs have no truth-value (McGee 9). Although Calhoun appropriates ideographs for his purposes, such an appropriation does not establish the myth's fidelity to experience. The use of ideographs in Calhoun's nullification rhetoric fails to indicate a distinction between the desirability of his myth as an action guide and the myth's attractiveness or ease of acceptance.

Ideographs permit and encourage identification with Calhoun's cause, since his uncontested terms reflect the ideological matrices against which the conception of collective social action is framed (cf. McGee 9). Calhoun's extensive use of logical proofs (Bradley 413, 417; Bradley & Tarver 163) and his appeals to reason unclouded by emotion (Bradley 413) or "excitement of feeling" (*Speeches* 119) indicate more than deference for his audience (Bradley 413). or adherence to the aesthetic and moral conventions of the age (Weaver 173-183). Although these factors might be significant, the 'logic' Calhoun uses surfaces

linguistically in his ideographic rationalization of political action (McGee 13).

Conclusion

I have offered a necessarily incomplete account of how the use of uncontested terms parallels on a microscopic level the macroscopic persuasive resources of mythic rhetoric. Using John C. Calhoun's nullification rhetoric as a case study of political myth, the persuasive character of myth comes more clearly into focus. Myths can serve as preludes to political action by unifying individuals into collectivities which share perceptions of a common heritage and a common destiny. A mythic version of reality envelops its participants by offering a totalizing metaphysical explanation for particular actions and events, thus lending coherence to apparent confusion. A productive direction for future research would be to investigate to what extent the mythic rationalization of history becomes especially attractive during moments of personal or social crisis.

This essay, aside from assessing the rhetorical dynamics of myths per se, re-evaluates Calhoun's arguments for nullification. Rather than letting rhetorical effectiveness be judged by whose suggestions find their way into the statute books, I propose that critics delve into the operation of strategic ambiguity within artifacts. Perhaps we should base our critical judgments as much on mythically and narratively generated insight as on historical hindsight.

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