The Rhetoric of RHETORIC

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The Rhetoric of RHETORIC

The Quest for Effective Communication

Wayne C. Booth

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For my wife, Phyllis, thanking her for six decades of criticism
of my frequent failure to practice
listening-rhetoric

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Preface

In 1960, I was at a post-lecture reception in Oxford. Chatting over drinks with a don, I asked him what subject he taught.

> "Chiefly eighteenth-century literature. What is *your* field?"
> "Basically it's rhetoric, though I'm officially in 'English.' I'm trying to complete a book that will be called *The Rhetoric of Fiction*."
> "Rhetoric!" He scowled, turned his back, and strode away.

Forty years later (summer 2003), I attended the semi-annual "Conference on Rhetoric and Composition" at Pennsylvania State University. This year it was entitled "Rhetoric's Road Trips: Histories and Horizons," with about 200 rhetoricians sharing views about rhetoric and rhetorical studies. Though many different definitions of rhetoric emerged, as always, it was clear that everyone there took rhetorical studies seriously, and would have felt even more startled by the Oxford scholar's response than I had been in 1960. But just imagine how surprised – even annoyed – he would be now if he stumbled upon that conference, or the many other annual conferences about rhetoric. There has been an amazing outburst of attention to rhetoric, though most academics in other fields are unaware of it. Too many academics view the study of rhetoric as at the bottom of the ladder: it is merely fussing with cheap persuasion.

So the point of this "manifesto" will be both to celebrate the recent flowering of studies and to lament their confinement to

a tiny garden in a far corner of our academic and public world. Since we are all flooded daily with rhetoric, admirable and contemptible, we are in desperate need of serious rhetorical study, everywhere. Of course it is true, as chapter 4 will illustrate, that scholars in many fields are studying rhetorical issues, though under other "communication" terms. But too often they are unaware of how much they might learn about their basic questions by studying not just this or that branch of thoughtful communication – philosophy, symbiotics, linguistics, sociology, psychology, language studies – but *rhetoric*.

That claim would probably annoy the Oxford don even more than did my use of the term back then, and he would still be joined by various academics today. Many still view all rhetoric as what Stephen Spender described in those days: "Rhetoric is the art of deception, isn't it? And when you become good at using rhetoric on other people you eventually and all unknowingly use it on yourself."[1] Even some of those who engage in its study often treat it as, at best, the art of manipulation of audiences, or of promoting a reality or truth discovered through other means: a kind of icing to a cake that is produced by real thought. For some it sinks even lower, becoming little better than the crippled servant of true thinkers.[2] Just glance through the following four selections from the hundreds I have collected, echoing Spender, or Bertrand Russell's dismissal of Lytton Strachey's style as "unduly rhetorical," used only to "touch up the picture" and "make the lights and shades more glaring."

- "Impoverished students deserve solutions, not rhetoric." Letter to *Chicago Tribune*.
- "All that other stuff is rhetoric and bull. I don't think about it." Athletic coach.
- "[What I've just said] is not rhetoric or metaphor. It's only truth." Columnist attacking race prejudice.
- "President Bush's speech was long on rhetoric and short on substance." *New York Times Editorial*.

Even many dictionaries concentrate on the pejorative. Here is how one of them puts it:

> *rhetoric*: n. the theory and practice of eloquence, whether spoken or written, the whole art of using language to persuade others; false, showy, artificial, or declamatory expression; *rhetorical*: oratorical; inflated, over-decorated, or insincere in style; *rhetorical question*: a question in form, for rhetorical effect, not calling for an answer.

Thus we rhetoricians are not surprised – just scandalized again – when a literary critic says, as I heard recently in a discussion after a fine lecture: "Let's cut the rhetoric and get down to some serious talk." We have encountered that dismissal ever since Socrates, quarreling with the Sophists in Plato's *Phaedrus*, summarized his attack: "He who would be a skillful rhetorician has no need of truth." Serious talk deals with realities, rhetoric is fluff, or, when it is inescapable, it is merely the necessary art we have for dealing with probabilities rather than certainties.

My effort here to expand the recent flowering will not be a denial of how much shoddy rhetoric we face – much of it deserving to be called mere rhetrickery. A great proportion of rhetoric, however we define it, is in fact dangerously, often deliberately, deceptive: just plain cheating that deserves to be exposed. Is it not then naive to hope that rhetorical terms and their study can be restored to full respectability? Can the condemners be woken up to see that "rhetoric" covers, not just rhetrickery – the art of *producing* misunderstanding – but what I. A. Richards calls "the art of *removing* misunderstanding"?[3] Can we hope that more and more will see rhetorical training as essential in learning not only how to protect against deception, but also how to conduct argument that achieves trustworthy agreement and thus avoids the disasters of violence?

Two readers of a draft here have objected: "Of course we need to improve our search for effective communication, but why must we label that search rhetorical?" If you share that objection, perhaps you can invent some term that covers territory as broad as what we

rhetoricians see covered by our terms. The territory is, after all, undefinable, since it includes almost every corner of our lives. Rhetoric is employed at every moment when one human being intends to produce, through the use of signs or symbols, some effect on another – by words, or facial expressions, or gestures, or any symbolic skill of any kind. Are you not seeking rhetorical effect when you either smile or scowl or shout back at someone who has just insulted you? As Longaville puts the claim about the rhetorical power of physical gesture, in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

> Did not the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye,
> 'Gainst whom the world cannot hold argument,
> Persuade my heart to this false perjury?

Is not an artist aiming at rhetorical effect when she asks herself, "Will this stroke make the painting seem a better one, to the viewer?" (The point is more obvious when the stroke is deliberately shocking, as in the use of actual elephant dung in a painting.) Wasn't Shelley justified in celebrating poets as the unacknowledged legislators of mankind? Are not those rhetoricians who study music as rhetorical justified? Nothing produces more effect on others than a well-composed and performed song or symphony. Even a deliberate murder can be considered as rhetoric if the intent is to change the minds of the survivors. (That extreme form of rhetoric will be mostly ignored here, as I celebrate rhetoric as our primary alternative to violence.)

In short, rhetoric will be seen as *the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another*: effects ethical (including everything about character), practical (including political), emotional (including aesthetic), and intellectual (including every academic field). It is the entire range of our use of "signs" for communicating, effectively or sloppily, ethically or immorally. At its worst, it is our most harmful miseducator – except for violence. But at its best – when we learn to listen to the "other," then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine

dialogue – it is our primary resource for *avoiding* violence and building community.

True enough, defining any term so broadly risks making it seem useless. If we call every effort at communication rhetorical, and every effort to study it "rhetorical studies," what happens to all of our other general terms – to "philosophy," "sociology," "literary criticism," "political science," "theology," or even "scientific discourse"? Well, as is shown by the astonishing explosion of books and articles entitled "The Rhetoric of..." (see appendix to chapter 2), we are now invited to think hard about the rhetoric of *everything*; "the rhetoric of philosophy," "the rhetoric of sociology," "the rhetoric of religion," even "the rhetoric of science." Though these rhetorics are not all of the same kind, we should recognize that all of these fields depend on rhetoric in their arguments. Most of them are in fact grappling with rhetorical issues, as they debate their professional claims. Thus we find the old rhetorical question, "What makes effective persuasion?" now expanded to, "How can we distinguish, in every human domain, the good from the bad forms of persuasion or discussion or communication?"

Unfortunately, my "universalizing" definition dramatizes the impossibility of covering the subject in a short book. The breadth forces me into many claims that will seem questionable and unsubstantiated with full evidence. But one solid central claim unites them: the quality of our lives, especially the ethical and communal quality, depends to an astonishing degree on the quality of our rhetoric. And since the pursuit of genuine rhetorical quality is still sadly neglected except by us professional rhetoricians, it is time for a reinforcement of the flowering of rhetorical studies that has occurred in the last six or eight decades, not just in the United States but in many European countries. Unless we pay more attention to improving our communication at all levels of life, unless we study more carefully the rhetorical strategies we all depend on, consciously, unconsciously, or subconsciously, we will continue to succumb to unnecessary violence, to loss of potential friends, and to the decay of community.

A Brief Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 1 addresses the threatening morass of rival definitions of rhetoric, ancient and modern. As I rely on the broader definitions, I do not claim that rhetorical studies can cover the whole of life, or that all academics should drop their rival titles and call themselves rhetoricians. Though I wish they all would acknowledge their kinship with rhetorical studies, the main point is simply that the reduction of rhetorical terms to the pejorative is not just absurd; it is harmful to our thinking.

Chapter 2 traces briefly the rise and fall and rise again of inquiry that has employed rhetorical terminology, from ancient times through the Renaissance to the present. Why was there such a huge decline until mid-twentieth century and then an astonishing embrace of explicit usage and profound study?

Chapter 3 addresses the problem of distinguishing defensible and indefensible rhetoric, tracing the diverse goals of rhetors, from deliberate harm, through winning-at-all-cost, and on to harmonious understanding and even the discovery of new truths. The key test is whether genuine *listening* has been granted opponents. As my colleague Joe Williams has put it, the really defensible rhetor listens to the opponent so well that she can answer his questions before they're even asked. But even listening-rhetoric, which I label LR throughout, raises ethical distinctions: Am I listening with the hope for a kind of ethical understanding, a true joining of inquiry, or am I listening merely in order to trick you – or at least win by defeating you?

Chapter 4 first illustrates the obvious point that all thinkers, even "hard" scientists, cannot escape rhetoric. Then it celebrates a selection of first-class thinkers who have revived rhetorical inquiry, in the wake of the decline produced by various forms of "scientific positivism." The serious probing by what I call the "rescuers" – some using rhetorical terms, some not – could almost be described as "the history of modern, and *post*modern, thought."

Chapter 5 laments the widespread neglect of rhetoric in education. What are the consequences of our current failure to educate youngsters in how to protect themselves from the floods of rhetrickery, and in how to practice the good kinds of rhetoric? What *is* good rhetorical education, and what bad?

Chapter 6 turns to politics. Nobody questions that awful rhetoric is found everywhere in politics – not just rhetoric that fails with this or that audience but rhetoric that *deserves* to fail. Risking the charge "What's new about *that*?" I trace some of the ways in which political failure to practice LR harms both those of us subjected to it and ultimately the rhetors themselves.

Chapter 7 pursues the closely related problems in our media, especially the floods of rhetrickery that could be blamed for the predominantly pejorative definitions of rhetoric we live with. Too often we ignore how all of us – even those who think of ourselves as thinkers – get swept by the media into erroneous choices. Though a small number of journalists try to combat the trash, few among them move beyond mere outbursts of contempt to a genuine search for cures.

Chapter 8 turns to the toughest question of all: How can the deepest form of LR, which I awkwardly label "rhetorology," yield not just diplomatic truce but discovery of new shared truths? How can we push LR to the point of finding common ground, shared assumptions, on which opponents can not just stand together but move forward together, as they probe their differences?

The chapter pursues ways in which the neglect of rhetorology often corrupts our lives. Using the warfare between science and religion as the central example, I explore how opponents might labor – probing their rival rhetorics – to discover the undisputed, firm platforms both sides stand on, as they pursue their arguments. The point is not that our disputes will go away, but that thinking about our rival rhetorics can often rescue us from meaningless conflict.

I hope it is clear by now that despite the academic emphasis in some parts of this book, especially chapter 4, it is not addressed only to

academics. Though I try to wake up a few professors in every field to rhetoric's relevance to everything they do, both in teaching and in research, my fusion of celebration and lamentation is addressed to all readers who care about misunderstanding and the skills required to achieve understanding. No matter who we *think* we are, no matter where we now stand, triumphant or trembling, we are – to repeat again – in constant need of further thought about how we address our friends or enemies, in speech, in writing, in live performance, in the arts.

None of our problems with rhetoric will ever be completely solved, even by studying those geniuses I mention in chapter 4, or by reading regularly in any of the many new journals that concentrate on rhetoric (see chapter 2, n. 1). But if you and I are to avoid disastrous choices we must work even harder than I have done, through my five decades of probing, to recognize when we should cool down and really listen, and when one or another rhetorical version of reality offers us good reasons for changing our minds – and our ways of "talking back."

Every professional rhetorician will feel some exasperation here about my neglect of this or that major rhetorical issue. "You have almost nothing about the vast range of choices among figures of speech that every rhetor depends on." "You say nothing about the decline of attention to stylistic and formal clarity, as dramatized by linguist John McWhorter in his book *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care* (2003)." "You haven't a single section on any of the great classical rhetoricians." I can only answer: "Sorry, but did your last short book cover *everything*?"

Acknowledgments

Because of the flowering through my lifetime, no thank-you list can be adequate. If you do not find yourself here or in the appendices to chapters 2 and 4, or in my endnotes, please forgive me.

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Part I

Rhetoric's Status: Up, Down, and – Up?

It's hard to think of any academic subject with a history more confusing than that of rhetorical studies. Not only is the story longer than that of any besides philosophy. Rhetoric's reputation has risen and fallen probably more times, and more drastically, than that of any other subject. It's true that most subjects – even philosophy and science – have received some blind attacks along the way. But rhetoric and the study of its good and bad features have been uniquely controversial. Or so I claim, without even a hint of empirical proof of the kind lacking in most rhetorical studies. It is that lack that has sparked many of the dismissals, especially since the Enlightenment.

In these four chapters, after further tracing of the confused history of rival definitions (chapter 1), and a brief dramatization of rhetoric's disasters and triumphs (chapter 2), I address the complex evaluation problems that have led so many critics to see *all* rhetoric as contemptible (chapter 3). Finally, I celebrate a variety of thinkers who have revived serious rhetorical inquiry after the assassination attempts by positivists. Many of these rescuers have used almost no rhetorical terms, as they have fought to revive serious inquiry into emotion (pathos) and character (ethos) and other neglected topics. The concluding rescuers, those who receive most space, are – not surprisingly – those who openly revived rhetorical terms and concepts. They are the ones who have practiced a rhetoric of *rhetoric*.

1

How Many "Rhetorics"?

Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapter 2

Rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit.

John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

The new rhetoric covers the whole range of discourse that aims at persuasion and conviction, whatever the audience addressed and whatever the subject matter.

Chaim Perelman

Any confident claim about the importance of rhetorical studies requires as a first step some sorting of diverse definitions. No one definition will ever pin rhetoric down. As Aristotle insisted, in the first major work about it – *The Art of Rhetoric* – rhetoric has no specific territory or subject matter of its own, since it is found everywhere. But it is important to escape the reductions of rhetoric to the non-truth or even anti-truth kinds. The term must always include both the verbal and visual garbage flooding our lives and the tools for cleaning things up.[1]

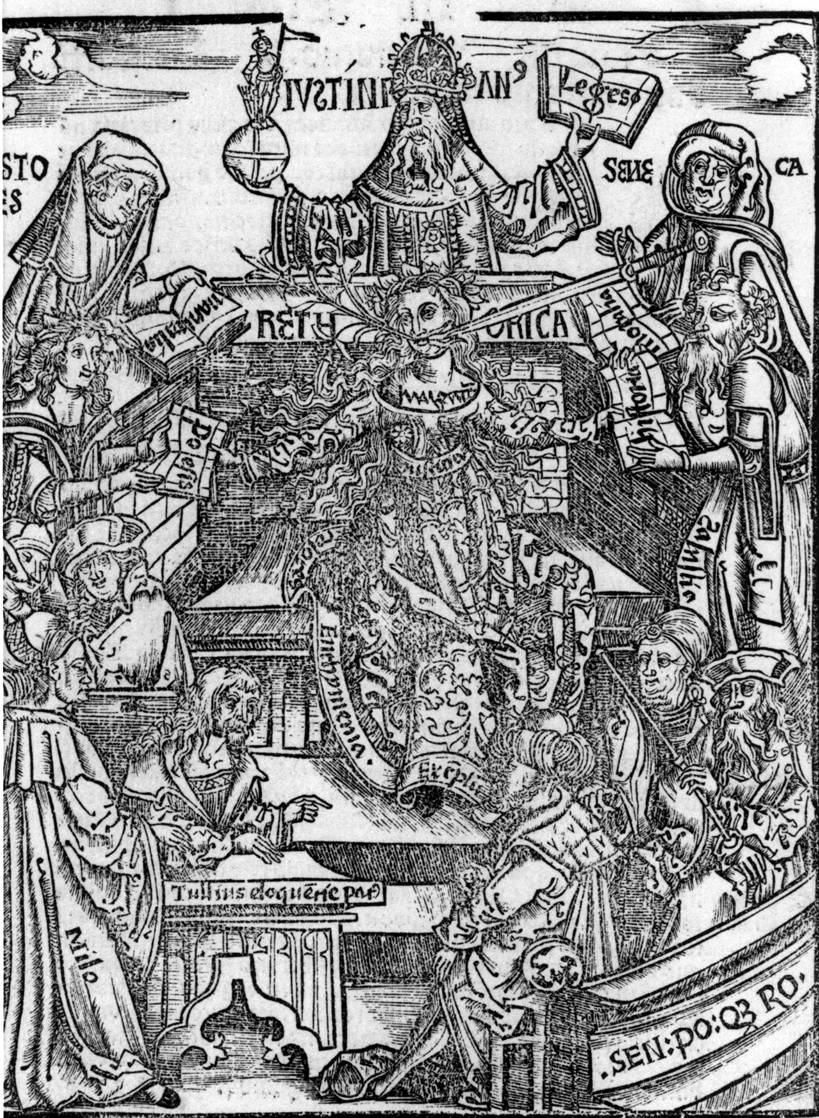
Contrasting definitions of rhetoric, both as the art of discourse and as a study of its resources and consequences, have filled our literature,

from the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and other classicists, on through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, until today. In its beginning, rhetoric was often confined to the oratory of males; usually it was the range of resources for winning in politics. By now everyone rejects the male emphasis and many agree to extend the terms, as I have already done here, to cover more than all verbal exchange; it includes all forms of communication short of physical violence, even such gestures as raising an eyebrow or giving the finger.[2]

From the pre-Socratics through about two millennia, most definitions, even when warning against rhetoric's powers of destruction, saw it as at least one of the indispensable human arts. Nobody questioned the importance of *studying* it systematically. Even Plato, perhaps the most negative critic of rhetoric before the seventeenth century, saw its study as essential. Though he often scoffed at it as only the Sophistic "art of degrading men's souls while pretending to make them better" (from the *Gorgias*), he always at least implied that it had to be central to any inquiry about thinking.

Thus for millennia scholars and teachers assumed that every student should have extensive training in rhetoric's complexities. Sometimes it was even placed at the top of the arts, as a monarch supervising all or most inquiry (See p. 5). The queen was of course often dethroned, becoming for many at best a mere courtier, or even a mere servant assisting the other three primary arts: logic, grammar, and dialectic. Even the most favorable critics recognized that in its worst forms it was one of the most dangerous of human tools, while at its best it was what made civilized life possible. Here are a few of the best-known premodern definitions:

- "Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic. It is the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion." (Aristotle)
- "Rhetoric is one great art comprised of five lesser arts: *inventio* [usually translated as invention but I prefer discovery], *dispositio, elocutio, memoria*, and *pronunciatio*. It is speech designed to persuade." (Cicero)



Rhetorica waving her sword over other sciences and arts.

- "Rhetoric is the science of speaking well, the education of the Roman gentleman, both useful and a virtue." (Quintilian)
- "Rhetoric is the art of expressing clearly, ornately (where necessary), persuasively, and fully the truths which thought has discovered acutely." (St. Augustine)
- "Rhetoric is the application of reason to imagination for the better moving of the will. It is not solid reasoning of the kind science exhibits." (Francis Bacon)

With the explosion of passionate "scientific rationality" in the Enlightenment, more and more authors, while continuing to study and teach rhetoric, followed Bacon in placing it down the scale of genuine pursuit of truth. The key topic, *inventio* (the discovery of solid argument), was shoved down the ladder, while *elocutio* (style, eloquence) climbed to the top rung. By the eighteenth century almost everyone, even those producing full textbooks for the study of rhetoric, saw it as at best a useful appendage to what hard thinking could yield, as in the Augustine definition above. As scholars embraced the firm distinction between fact and value, with knowledge confined to the domain of fact, rhetoric was confined to sharpening or decorating either unprovable values or factual knowledge derived elsewhere. Even celebrators of rhetorical study tended to equivocate about rhetoric's claim as a source of knowledge or truth – a tool of genuine reasoning.[3] Here is George Campbell's slightly equivocal praise, in mid-eighteenth century: "Rhetoric is that art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end. All the ends of speaking are reducible to four; every speech being intended to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, and to influence the will."[4]

Many others, even among those trained in classical rhetoric, became much more negative. Perhaps the best summary of the negative view of rhetoric is that of John Locke, who wrote, in his immensely influential *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690):

> [If] we would speak of *things as they are*, we must allow that all the arts of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative

> application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but *to insinuate wrong ideas*, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed *are perfect cheats*: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, *wholly to be avoided*; *and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault*, either of the language or person that makes use of them. . . . It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since *rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit*, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and I doubt not but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said this much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. (Book 3, chapter 10, conclusion; my italics)

As such rhetoric-laden mistreatments flourished (note Locke's use of "the fair sex"!), Aristotle's description of rhetoric as the counterpart or sibling (*antistrophos*) of dialectic became reinterpreted as a reinforcement of the view that even at best it is no more than our resource for jazzing up or bolstering ideas derived elsewhere. And more and more thinkers reduced it to rhetrickery, sometimes even today simply called "mere rhetoric."

It was only with the twentieth-century revival that the term again began to receive more favorable definitions. Aristotle's claim that it was the *antistrophos* of dialectic became again interpreted to mean that rhetoric and dialectic overlap, as equal companions, each of them able to cover everything.[5] By now, many of us rhetoricians have decided – to repeat – that all hard thought, even what Aristotle called dialectic, either depends on rhetoric or can actually be described as a version of it. Here are some modern additions to the expanded definitions:

- "Rhetoric is the study of misunderstandings and their remedies." (I. A. Richards, 1936)