# WHO NEEDS RHETORIC?

**James Heffernan**

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Rhetoric is the word we fling like a mudpie at any kind of speech we disbelieve, distrust, or seek to disparage. Not long ago, Mr. Newt Gingrich said that what we need in the White House is "less rhetoric and more leadership." Such is the status of public discourse in the country right now that the Speaker of the House of Representatives can thus dismiss the art of speaking itself, can thus treat it as something alien and irrelevant to leadership in public life, as if a president could lead only by literally playing commander in chief on a battlefield, only by mounting a horse or a tank and charging the enemy at the head of his troops.

But today the enemy is rhetoric itself. At best, we commonly think, rhetoric is puffery, propaganda, blarney, spin—a language of inflation, evasion, or sheer fabrication; at worst rhetoric can be diabolically seductive. The first master of rhetoric was Satan, the greatest of all tempters, and in Milton's version of Genesis, called *Paradise Lost*, the speeches of Satan are cunning enough not only to tempt Eve but to tempt us readers, to make us feel that Satan is the tragic hero of the poem, the champion of liberty forever defying the tyrannical omnipotence of God. In human history the closest thing we have to Satan is Adolph Hitler, whose power flowed directly from his mouth. In Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will,* her great documentary film on the Nazi party rallies held at Nuremberg in 1934, you can see and

hear Hitler mesmerize an army of thousands with the manic stridency of his voice alone.

So rhetoric seems contemptible at best and diabolical at worst. It was in fact blighted almost from the day of its birth. If you look back to the beginnings of rhetoric in ancient Greece, you find that it was virtually born to a bad press. Its fonnding father was a man named Isocrates—not to be confused with Socrates. But just a few years after Isocrates founded the first school of rhetoric at the beginning of the fourth century B.C., Plato—the pupil of Socrates—founded near Athens his celebrated Academy. There he attacked the rhetoricians for a host of sins: their indifference to truth, their love of probability, their verbal sleight of hand, their distortions, their exaggerations, their eagerness to magnify trifles and trivialize what is truly important. Distrust of rhetoric, then, is almost as old as rhetoric itself, and not even Cicero could dispel it. On the contrary, his tongue undid him. Greatest of ancient Roman orators and possibly the greatest orator of all time, he was butchered for daring to criticize Marc Antony. Worse still, Plutarch tells us that when Cicero's head and right hand—his *writing* hand—were brought to Marc Antony, he burst out laughing—and then ordered the head and the hand of Cicero to be nailed above the Rostra in the Roman Forum.

If Cicero thus becomes a gruesome poster boy for the anti-rhetorical tradition, let us remember that he got nailed—quite literally—for speaking out on behalf of republicanism, which we would now call democracy, and

for daring to denounce the dictatorial ambitions of Marc Antony, who could answer criticism only by means of violence. Let us remember too that rhetoric begins as an art of public speech, as the language that makes community and civilization possible. Listen to the words of Isocrates, whom Cicero called the master of all rhetoricians, writing in the fourth century B.C.:

> In most of our abilities we differ not at all from the animals; we are in
> fact behind many in swiftness and strength and other resources. But because there
> is born in us the power to persuade each other and to show ourselves whatever we
> wish, we have not only escaped from living as brutes, but also by coming together
> have founded cities and set up laws and invented arts, and speech has helped us attain practically all of the things we have devised. For it is speech that has made
> laws about justice and injustice and honor and disgrace, without which provisions
> we should not be able to live together. By speech we educate the ignorant and
> inform the wise.

To recall the origin of rhetoric is to see that the alternative to it is not unvarnished

truth but violence and brutality, which is what erupts when speech breaks down, when men and women who disagree can no longer talk to each other. The alternative to rhetoric is terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and festering hatred: the kind of hatred that has made a living hell out of places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East. One of the most remarkable events of this year is the overwhelming vote for peace in Northern Ireland, and still more remarkable is the fact that even after 28 people were killed in Omagh by yet another bomb, the leaders of Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionists are beginning to talk to each other. For more than three hundred years, Northern Ireland has been riven by sectarian violence. When and if the warring sides can give up their guns and bombs and fight with the weapons of rhetoric alone, Northern Ireland may achieve the kind civility that Isocrates described more than 2000 years ago.

For more help in explaining just what rhetoric is, I want to turn now from Isocrates to Aristotle, who studied under Plato but definitely did not imbibe his animus against rhetoric. Aristotle defines rhetoric simply as the art of persuasion, more precisely as the art of "observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us." We all know only too well the subject now presented to us in the Congress of the United States—

though it is probably safe to say that not even Aristotle could have foreseen it. Some of our representatives think the president should be impeached; some of them think he should serve out his term; and some of them think of nothing but getting themselves re-elected. But whatever they think should happen to the president or to themselves, they cannot legally get anyone else on their side without resorting to rhetoric, the art of persuasion. So one answer to the question posed by my title is: Congress. Congress needs rhetoric, and one of the things that Congresspersons might well read in the next few weeks—along with the Starr report—is Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric.

In this treatise Aristotle identifies three modes of persuasion available to a speaker: *logos, pathos,* and *ethos*. *Logos* means word, the verbal content of the speech, the objectively measurable *logic* of its argument: the part of the speech, we might now say, that can best be transmitted and preserved in print. (In nineteenth-century America, before radio and TV, let alone the internet, print was the chief means by which politicians spoke to the American people and thus made their reputations; that is, they spoke to the people by delivering speeches that were good enough to be circulated in print.) After *logos*, the verbal content of the speech, comes *pathos*, which signifies much more than its current English meaning of sadness. *Pathos* is the sense of passion that drives and animates and electrifies the speaker's words; it's the feeling that a speaker excites in the hearts of his or her audience. *Pathos*, in short, is what usually makes the difference between a

boring speech and moving one. Finally, *ethos* is the person or personality of the speaker—everything that answers the question, "who's talking?" But Aristotle hastens to say that *ethos* is not the same as reputation. Reputation is what the speaker brings to the speech—whatever title to credibility he or she may have gathered before opening his or her mouth. So if I ask you to believe what I say about writing because of my new title as Professor in the Art of Writing, you should send me packing. You should send me right back to Aristotle. Because Aristotle tells us, and rightly tells us, that a speaker must earn his credibility by what he says, by the kind of personality he projects through his spoken words. And the words of a speaker who stands before you are not wholly separable from the tone of his voice, the cock of his head, the glint in his eye, perhaps even from the cut of his jacket or the color of his necktie—both of which I chose very carefully today.

Of all the things that Aristotle says in his treatise on rhetoric, none is more dramatically relevant to the current crisis in Washington than his claim for the role of *ethos* in the act of persuasion. For just about all discussion of whether or not the president should be impeached turns on the so-called "character issue," the question of whether or not he can be trusted. Most people who write about persuasion and argument—including me--underestimate the personal factor. We focus on thins like logic, evidence, and deduction. All of these are important, but none is more important than the speaker's credibility: that is, the impression he creates by the way he looks and sounds. Listen to Aristotle again: "It is not true, as some writers

assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called *the most effective means of persuasion he possesses*" (emphasis mine). In that one sentence, Aristotle tells us far more about President Clinton's chances of staying in office than Kenneth Starr and his prosecutors do in 445 pages. Starr and his crew set out to destroy the president's credibility, and the superweapon in their attack on him was the four-and-one-half hour videotape of his testimony to the grand jury: a videotape which they must have known would eventually be shown to the American public. But if they thought the videotape would simply expose the president's sleaziness, they forgot that he is a master of rhetoric, and above all a master in the art of sounding believable—even when he may be stretching the truth like a bungee cord. For this reason, the videotape that his enemies thought would kill Clinton might turn out to be the elixir that revives him, that miraculously enables the comeback kid to come back yet again.

But I must come back to my topic, which is rhetoric, and to the vexing question of its relation to truth. If rhetoric is the art of persuasion, as Aristotle says, then we might think of it as simply a cosmetic or sartorial art, as a way of dressing up the truth or dabbing rouge and powder on the bare face of reality—as veneer, paintwork, or ornamentation, as decoration that hides and disguises the facts. To think of rhetoric this way is to feel something like the rage that Hamlet flings at Ophelia when he attacks her

and all women for painting their faces. "I have heard of your paintings well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another." Why must women paint the faces God has given them? Why do rhetoricians paint and varnish the truth? Why can't they just give us the bare, unvarnished wood of fact. Why do we need anything more? Well for one thing, the bare, unvarnished wood of fact is made up of words, and whenever you get words that communicate anything clearly, you are almost certainly getting rhetoric as well, for rhetoric is not just the art of persuasion. It is the art of communication, of speaking or writing in such a way as to be clearly understood.

As an art of communication, rhetoric informs the simplest statement of fact. Suppose I say simply, "The sun rose today." To be quite safe, I don't even mention a time, lest that be inaccurate; I say just, "the sun rose today." Here, you might say, is the bare, unvarnished wood of fact: who can quarrel with it? Who indeed? Nicolas Copernicus, that's who. Nearly five hundred years ago, Copernicus showed that the universe is heliocentric, with the sun fixed in the center and all other spheres—including the earth—orbiting around it. So it is utterly false to say that the sun rose today, or any other day. Day begins when the part of the spinning earth we live on turns or falls within range of the sun's rays. What we call sunrise, therefore, is really earthfall, or earthturn. Why then do we call it sunrise? Why do we thus paint and distort the face of truth? Because earthfall *appears* to us as sunrise; that's the way we see it. To be understood by you or anyone else who lives

on this earth, I must not only speak your language; I must recognize and reckon with your point of view. That is why I need the art of rhetoric.

Now up to this point you may have been wondering what all this has to do with writing, the art I am officially authorized to profess. Actually, Professor in the Art of Writing sounds a little like a nineteenth-century master of penmanship, which is hugely laughable to anyone who knows that my handwriting hovers perpetually on the edge of illegibility. But having long ago learned to form my letters by something excruciating known as the Palmer method, let me show you what I can do when I really try:

[carefully handwritten}

Mary love Bill.

I hope you will all agree that this is a specimen of good writing in the most elementary sense: it's readily legible. If I were just learning to form my letters and you were my first grade teacher, you would surely say to me, "Very good, Jimmy! Well done!" Good handwriting deserves praise. Until the advent of the typewriter in the late nineteenth century and then word processing in the late twentieth, good handwriting was something students were regularly taught to cultivate, and it has a long and distinguished history. To cite just a few examples, the art of calligraphy—which means beautiful handwriting—can be seen in Papyrus fragments dating from the fourth century B.C., in the wealth of elegantly sinuous Islamic inscriptions dating from the Middle Ages, and the multi-media works wrought by the literati of old China, who used the very same brush to write and to draw. I

don't want to get nostalgic here for some golden age of pre-technological purity, because I love the computer and I've been doing nearly all my writing on it for almost twenty years. But for all sorts of reasons I do not believe the computer will ever make handwriting obsolete.

Having thus offered you a specimen of my own good handwriting, I now hasten to recognize what many of you have no doubt been aching to tell me: this may be good handwriting but it is not good *writing* because it is marred by a glaring grammatical error. Unless the writer is *ordering* Mary to love Bill, the word *love* should be *loves*. This is of course the sort of error that English teachers—the grammar police—are paid to correct, and is commonly thought to be the sort of error that distinguishes good writing from bad. What it actually does is identify the writer as educated or uneducated, for the rules of English grammar can be very complicated. Suppose you were asked to say why the *s* is needed with *love* here. Unless you teach English for a living, you're unlikely to be able to say right off the bat that the verb ends in *s* only when the subject is third person singular, the tense is present, and the mood is indicative. If you haven't yet picked up this rule by osmosis, by reading and listening to educated speakers, you've got to think about four different grammatical concepts: tense, mood, person, and number—just to get this simple sentence grammatically correct.

Now I have great respect for the rules of grammar, and I must thank my friend John Lincoln for strengthening my grasp of those rules in our many years of collaboration on the Norton writing handbooks. I must also

say that as a teacher of English, I'm conditioned to notice errors in grammar and punctuation—it's a kind of occupational tic that most of the time I must fight to control. In the basement of a paint store in West Lebanon, New Hampshire, for instance, there's a sign over a door reading, "Employee's Only." Every time I see that sign, I have to fight the urge to grab a paintbrush and white out the apostrophe. I confess also that I take malicious pleasure in seeing the high and mighty stumble into grammatical error, as the Chairman of the New Hampshire Board of Education did recently. Commenting on the basic skills test that is now being given to all first time teachers in this state, he said he thought the test would "make people feel a lot better about who they get as teachers." It should of course be *whom*, Mr. Chairman, and perhaps you too could use a little brushing up on those basic skills. But enforcing the rules of grammatical etiquettes in this way too easily becomes a game of one-upmanship—a game played only on the edges of the field of communication.

For if good writing means writing that can be readily understood, grammatical correctness has not very much to do with it. The kind of grammatical errors that people commonly make—the kind of errors that English teachers routinely correct—seldom destroy the meaning of a sentence. In almost forty years of teaching, I have never seen a sentence like this in a student paper:

Loves Bill Mary.

This isn't just ungrammatical. It's pure gibberish-- because it violates one of the simplest and most basic rules of English syntax, which is that the subject comes before the verb and the object goes after it. But nobody who speaks any English at all makes this sort of mistake. In other words, the kind of grammatical errors that uneducated speakers and writers typically make help to keep English teachers employed—and I don't for a moment underestimate the importance of that—but they don't usually impede communication. If you tell me that Mary love Bill, I know exactly what you mean. Likewise, we have no trouble understanding the words of a retired electrician named Frank Cooper who had just won 105 million dollars in the Powerball lottery. Asked what he would do with all that money, he replied, "I don't know yet. I ain't never been a millionaire before." Does anyone here have the least bit of trouble understanding what he means?

Now the grammarian may learnedly explain that a rule has been broken here, because in English a double negative makes a positive. Quite aside from the vulgarity of "ain't," saying that that you "ain't *never*" been a millionaire before means—by the rules of English grammar—that you *have* been a millionaire at some time. But we know perfectly well that Frank Cooper means nothing of the kind. Sometimes grammar, like the law, is an ass. A double negative makes a positive in mathematics (minus minus 1 = plus 1), but language does not work like mathematics, and no matter how ungrammatical it may be, a double negative in English can serve to *emphasize* negation—as it does in French, where "je *ne* sais *pas*" means "I

don't know." In statements like Cooper's, the double negative crosses the line from grammar into rhetoric, the art of communication.

This does not mean that grammatical rules have nothing to do with communication. It means only that their effect on communication is primarily cultural. They serve as markers of class and educational status, and to that extent they affect the credibility of the speaker—what Aristotle called the *ethos* of a speech. If I tell you that grammar ain't important to good writing, you understand perfectly well what I want to say, but if you're educated, my use of "ain't" hurts my credibility, making it hard for you to trust anything else I might say about grammar. Thus bad grammar can hurt rhetorical effectiveness. But sometimes it can serve a rhetorical purpose, as it did when an international team of researchers discovered that the neutrino—a subatomic particle long thought to have no mass, or weight—turned out to have mass after all. Whereupon a Nobel prize-winning physicist named Leon Lederman said, "It shows us that we really just don't know nothin'" about what gives particles their diversity of masses. "Double negative!" says the grammarian. "Fix the sentence!" But the rhetorician finds Socratic humility here. To dramatize his bafflement at the deepest mysteries of physics, the great physicist makes himself *sound* grammatically ignorant, and thus underscores how much this new discovery undermines what learned physicists think they know.

I hope you don't misunderstand me here. I'm not suggesting that we should now start teaching students to make grammatical errors, for they can

do that very well without any help from their teachers. I am suggesting that the rules of grammar can teach us only a little of what we need to know in order to write well. No football team ever won a game by simply obeying all the rules of the game, and no writer ever won a reader by simply making all of his or her sentences grammatically correct. To see how much more than grammar is needed to make a piece of writing do its job, let's return to our simple example:

Mary loves Bill.

If good writing means writing that is grammatically correct, this sentence qualifies. But if good writing means writing that seizes and holds the attention of the reader, this sentence has a long way to go. It needs development, and it needs to begin reflecting the complexity of human relations. Suppose we add the word "although" at the beginning:

Although Mary loves Bill.

Now two things happen at once. First of all, the sentence suddenly becomes a non-sentence—a sentence fragment. It is no longer a complete sentence. This is the weird thing about adding a word like "although," which subordinates the sentence to something else. It turns the whole sentence into

a dependent clause, which cannot stand alone. So what we have now is grammatically wrong.

On the other hand, it is also more interesting than the original. It begins to suggest conflict; it begins to reflect the complexity of human relations. It makes us want to read on, which is what any piece of writing has to do if it wants to be read by somebody who is not being paid to read it, correct it, and grade it.

Very well, then, let's try completing this sentence:

DC IC

S P S P

Although Mary loves Bill, she wants to marry him.

The sentence is now grammatically complete, and as referee, the grammarian will see no need to throw down any red flags. If you're curious about what makes it complete, the grammarian will patiently explain that we now have a complex sentence containing one dependent clause (DC) and one independent clause (IC)—each containing its own subject (S) and predicate (P). Since the independent clause can stand alone, it can also support a dependent clause, and together the two of them make one complete sentence.

But to the rhetorician, this perfectly grammatical sentence is a perfectly confusing mess. Like a turn signal on a car, the word "although" signals a turn of thought coming up in the sentence—something that

complicates Mary's love of Bill. But the sentence never takes its turn; it just keeps on going straight ahead. We all know what it's like to follow a car that blinks and blinks and blinks and never turns; that's what it's like to read this sentence. To make this sentence rhetorically effective, we have to deliver on the promise made by the word "although." We have to make the turn promised by the turn signal:

Although Mary loves Bill, he does not love her.

OR

Although Mary loves Bill, he loves Rita.

OR

Although Mary loves Bill, he loves Jack.

The possibilities, you see, are endless.

This quite simple example shows the fundamental difference between grammar and rhetoric, and also shows how the writer can organize two or more bits of information so as to stress one of them over the other, to say that *this* point is more important than *that* one. We stress one point over another whenever we want to persuade someone else to adopt our point of view. "Although I totally wrecked your car, it was not my fault." "Although

your mutual fund lost half its value last year, we know you're with us for the long haul." And so on. Quite obviously this complex structure gives the writer various ways of spinning the facts, manipulating the relation between one fact and another, and in the hands of a skilled writer or great speechmaker, this kind of structure can become a lever of extraordinary force.

Consider what Winston Churchill did with it in a speech to the British House of Commons on June 4, 1940, just after more than 300,000 Allied troops had been defeated in Belgium and France and had to be evacuated from Dunkirk by British ships. With the fall of Belgium and France now inevitable, Churchill knew only too well that Britain would soon stand alone against the rockets and bombs of the vast German empire. In light of that fact, I want to quote just one sentence from the final paragraph of Churchill's speech: "Even though large tracts of Europe, and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail." To hear those final words, to hear those six little monosyllables standing up under the vast weight of German power conveyed by the long dependent clause, is to know exactly what Edward R. Murrow meant when he said that Churchill "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle."

Now I know very well that Churchill could be captivated by his own voice and deaf to others. And I also know what revisionist historians tell is of Churchill: they remind us that he authorized the fire-bombing of Dresden,

that at the end of the war he consigned the nations of Eastern Europe to the tender mercies of Josef Stalin, and that he was an incurable imperialist who fought to the end against the independence of India. I grant all that against Churchill, if you will only grant me this: that when Britain stood alone against the mightiest war machine every assembled in the history of humankind, when Neville Chamberlain could hold against it nothing but a piece of peacemaking paper fluttering in the breeze, and when the Duke of Windsor—having traded his throne for the hand of Mrs. Wallis Simpson—was conspiring to trade his entire country for a promise of peace with the Nazis—in short, when all events seemed bent on driving Britain to its knees, it was Churchill who stood up on his hind legs and gave the British people the words they desperately needed to hear: "We shall not flag or fail." That, Mr. Speaker of the House, is the rhetoric *of* leadership, and in times of crisis it is the kind of rhetoric we never cease to need.

But if this sort of rhetoric is needed only in the midst of a crisis, what sort of rhetoric serves other times? Let us consider the rhetoric of two quite different sentences—one literary, the other scientific. The literary sentence comes from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the now classic novel of an idealistic and highly educated European who goes insane while trading for ivory in the depths of the Belgian Congo. This novel has lately taken some lumps. In 1975, in a lecture given at Amherst College and since then widely printed, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe called *Heart of Darkness* "the work of a thoroughgoing racist." Now it's true that Conrad treats with

ignorant contempt the value of African culture and customs. But since Conrad also reveals the hideous consequences of believing that any one race is inherently superior to any other, he can hardly be called a *thoroughgoing* racist. In fact, at a seminar given a few years ago right here at Dartmouth, Achebe himself admitted that he had overstated his charge. He also said that students should continue to read *Heart of Darkness*, which he read himself at the age of 14 and which surely played some part in making him a writer. Achebe himself, I believe, would hardly wish that his own overstated attack on Conrad's racism should blind us to the mastery of rhetoric displayed in his tale.

I speak of its rhetoric even though rhetoric seems in some ways alien to literature—to storytelling. If rhetoric is an art of persuasion, why does the storyteller need it? Why can't he just let the story and the characters speak for themselves? The simple answer is that he is in charge of them of all, and therefore in charge of how they affect us. Just as lawyers and politicians often use stories to persuade us, storytellers often use rhetoric as a means of ordering their material, guiding us through what might otherwise be a wilderness of random detail and disconnected incidents. Consider how Conrad's narrator—Marlow—describes his voyage up the Congo River: "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted upon the earth and the big trees were kings."

The first part of this sentence is governed by parallel structure, which is a kind of rhyme that all good writers know how to use. Though rhyme has

all but disappeared from contemporary poetry, nobody needs to be sold on its pleasures: from childhood on, we like it instinctively because it works like a string around a bundle of sticks, binding different words together and thus making it easier for us to carry them in the memory. That is why Lincoln as a young man learned how to use the parallel structure so memorably deployed in the Gettysburg address: "we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground." Conrad's phrasing is likewise memorable, likewise powerfully suggestive. In Conrad's parallel, two different kinds of movement—one in space, the other in time—are bound together by the chime of *-ing*, and this binding leads us to see the relation between going up into the jungle and reversing the course of history, undoing human civilization, reverting to life in its prehuman condition. In the depths of the jungle, as in the earliest beginnings of the world, human actors are prefigured by vegetable life, which we typically think of as idle and lethargic but which here becomes ferociously animate: "vegetation rioted upon the earth."

The word *rioted* is of course a metaphor, a figure of speech. To show how wildly the trees and plants grow, Conrad implicitly compares them to a rioting crowd of people. We tend to think of metaphor as an ornament in writing, or as something poetic and therefore superfluous in prose, especially in prose that aims to tell us the unvarnished truth. Yet any writer who claims to be telling the unvarnished truth is speaking figuratively, using metaphor. Because metaphor represents abstract ideas in material form—the word

made flesh, truth as raw wood, growing as rioting—because metaphor puts abstract ideas into material form, it speaks to us as *embodied* minds, which is what we all are. None of us can long endure the airless stratosphere of pure abstraction. We need to imagine our bodies seeing, tasting, touching, hearing the ideas put before us. All language, as Shelley said, is a tissue of buried metaphor that good writers strive to exhume, to resurrect, re-awaken. How do I send my thoughts from my mind to yours? I struggle to ex-press them, to press them out, like squeezing paste from a tube.

I say all this by way of tribute to the magisterial rhetoric of Conrad's sentence. And I say it because if we do not now and then pause to admire and contemplate sentences like this one, we are losing a great part of what literature has to offer us. On the whole, contemporary literary theorists are deeply suspicious of aesthetic pleasure. This is the new Puritanism, and to me at least, it's no more appealing than the old Puritanism. Pleasure, I submit, is indispensable to learning anything, and no one can learn to write well without taking pleasure in reading and learning what kinds of writing give pleasure. Nothing that teaches of English do, I believe, is more important than cultivating within our students a profound and lasting admiration for the beauty and power of the English language—as deployed in works of literature that have stood the test of time.

But literature does not exhaust the possibilities of rhetoric, any more than speechmaking does. Science too has its rhetoric—by which I mean not simply the vocabulary of particular scientific disciplines, but the ways in

which scientists use language in their articles. Consider the opening sentence of the famous article in which James Watson and Francis Crick announced their discovery of DNA in 1953:

We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid.

This is an extraordinary sentence: extraordinary in its combination of simple, everyday words and highly technical terms, extraordinary in its melding of gentleness and audacity, self-restraint and self-assertion. In a landmark essay on three different kinds of academic discourse, a professor of rhetoric named Charles Bazerman devotes three full pages to this one sentence. He explains not just the meaning of its technical terms and the history of science they subtly reveal but also the special implications it manages to express through quite ordinary words, beginning with "we wish." The first person plural pronoun and the active voice of the verb flout the conventions of scientific discourse, which more often than not converts the action of the scientist into the passive voice so as to disclose the impersonal working of nature. And what of the verb itself here? Could there be anything more alien to scientific rigor than the verb to "wish," with all its connotations of desire and fantasy and imagination? Yet as Bazerman observes, the activity of wishing and the wishers themselves are immediately subordinated to the object in view—the structure of DNA.

To suggest a structure is first of all to assume that there *is* a substance that can be isolated under repeatable conditions. Furthermore, the name of

the substance reveals the history of chemistry itself—its gradually emerging tendency to describe most features and processes through structure. Just consider the final word of this sentence, *acid*. In the early seventeenth century, the age of Francis Bacon, this word meant only "sour in taste," an attribute or adjective; then it came to mean a sour-tasting *substance*, a noun; and finally, after further permutations, it has come to mean a molecule or ion that can bond with two electrons of another. As Bazerman says, "the tasting and taster vanish as the structure emerges."

Equally revealing and remarkable are the opening words of the sentence, as we've already begun to see. Every word in the sentence counts. "We wish to suggest a . . . " As Bazerman says, and I quote, "the authors are only *suggesting*, and the suggestion has only an indefinite article; whether *a* suggestion turns out to be *the* structure depends on nature. *Wish to suggest* is a form which implies humility before the facticity of the object, yet the phrase also has the boldness of the authors' presumption that their claim will indeed be confirmed by nature." Here is an interdisciplinary meeting of minds. As Bazerman's commentary shows, a specialist in rhetoric and the history of the language can shed a good deal of interpretive light on a ground-breaking statement made by two molecular biologists; in turn, the rhetoric of the biologists themselves, which adroitly combines humility and boldness, might well be studied by literary and cultural critics, who tend to assert—not suggest—*the* meaning of a particular text or cultural phenomenon.

Having thus ventured into the realm of science, I want to end by returning to literature, but also by turning against what I have up to now been defending: rhetoric. As the art of persuasion, rhetoric is indispensable to the building and maintenance of peaceful communities, but it is also a weapon that can be used to divide, as in Bosnia and Kosovo, where irredentist appeals to Serbian nationalism have fatally riven towns, village, neighborhoods, and even families. Precisely because it is a powerful art, rhetoric is also a dangerous one, and learning how to manage as well as master this art may be the hardest task a writer undertakes.

Its danger lies not only in its capacity to delude and inflame a crowd but also in its tendency to enchant the speaker himself or the writer herself with the Siren song of their own words. The only cure for this problem may be the bitter pill that a college tutor once prescribed to Samuel Johnson: "Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."

It is probably all but impossible for any writer to take this advice, and I have never ventured to give it to any of my students. But anyone who strives to write well has to know that rhetoric can all too easily become an art of inflation, pomposity, and pretension: a puff of smoke that wraps itself around the speaker, a great balloon of gas. No one shows this better than James Joyce in a chapter of *Ukysses* named for Aeolus, the god of winds. In this chapter, Joyce reveals three different pitfalls of rhetoric: three different

ways in which rhetorical virtuosity can mislead the speaker himself—and sometimes the listener too, unless we're listening very carefully.

In the course of this chapter, Stephen Dedalus goes to a newspaper office, where he hears a group of men talking about many things. As a young aspiring writer who stands for Joyce's younger self, Stephen is fascinated with the men's conversation and especially with the passages they quote from various speeches: passages that might serve as models for him to imitate and emulate in his own writing. Conveniently enough, each passage quoted illustrates one of the three kinds of rhetoric defined by Aristotle: ceremonial, the rhetoric of an occasion, such as one hears in the after-dinner speech or inaugural address; forensic, the rhetoric of the courtroom, where lawyers seek to sway the jury; and deliberative, the rhetoric of the legislature, where laws are debated. The first passage quoted is from an after dinner speech on the beauties of Ireland—a speech entitled, "Our Lovely Land." At one point in Joyce's chapter a printed version of the speech is mockingly read aloud from the newspaper by a sportswriter named Ned Lambert:

> Or again, note the meanderings of some purling rill as it babbles on its way, tho' quarrelling with the stony obstacles, to the tumbling waters of
> Neptune's blue domain, 'mid mossy banks, fanned by gentlest zephyrs,

> played on by the glorious sunlight or ‘neath the shadows cast o’er its
> pensive bosom by the overarching leafage of the giants of the forest.

Here Lambert interrupts his reading of the speech to burst out laughing at its overwrought diction: “The pensive bosom and the overarsing leafage. O boys! O boys!” But the emptiness of its language is best exposed by a simple question from Leopold Bloom, the middle-aged man of Hungarian Jewish descent who will eventually become—just briefly—something like a father figure to young Stephen. When Bloom learns that the speech is called, “Our Lovely Land,” he asks simply, “Whose land?” reminding one and all that in 1904, when the action of the novel takes place, all of Ireland belonged to Britain and was ruled by the government it appointed.

If the first speech quoted is nothing but a balloon of hot air punctured by Lambert’s mockery and Bloom’s simple question, the next speech quoted is distinctly more impressive. A specimen of forensic rhetoric, it was made by a lawyer named Seymour Bushe in defense of a man accused of murder. Bushe, we are told, contrasted Roman law with the Mosaic code, and then described the great marble figure of Moses sculpted by Michelangelo:

> that stony effigy in frozen music, horned and terrible, or the human form

> divine, that eternal symbol of wisdom and prophecy which, if aught that
> hand or imagination of sculptor has wrought in marble of soul-transfigured
> and soul-transfiguring deserves to live, deserves to live.

This splendid passage can hardly be dismissed with a laugh, for here is a movingly eloquent tribute to the greatness of the sculptor and the wisdom of the prophet he has rendered in stone. A stately row of majestic phrases trails a relative clause that suspends predication to the breaking point, like a giant wave falling at last on the listener's ear. But what does this all add up to? If we venture to ask just how this passage helps to establish the innocence of the accused, lawyer Bushe would be hard put to explain. The Mosaic law is the law of retribution, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the law that demands one death in payment for another. Given that fact, how can any tribute to the wisdom of Moses help the lawyer *save* his client from such retribution? At best, the passage does the client no good at all. It's irrelevant to the lawyer's argument. Caught up in his own gorgeous eloquence as in the luxurious folds of a great velvet cloak, he forgets his client and his case altogether.

The final passage quoted can hardly be faulted for irrelevance to the matter at hand, for it is both profoundly relevant and profoundly moving. It comes from a speech delivered at the Trinity College historical society

during the course of a debate on the revival of the Irish language. To feel the force of this topic, you have to know that during the nineteenth century, the British virtually obliterated the original language of Ireland by forbidding its use in the schools, and by the early twentieth century it was hardly spoken at all. So any attempt to recover the original Irish language—any attempt to recover what the English set out to destroy—is bound to have political implications that remain alive to this day. Most people know that *Sinn Fein* is the name of the Irish nationalist party with longstanding ties to the paramilitary IRA. But it's worth knowing also that *Sinn Fein*--meaning "We Ourselves" in Gaelic—was originally a cultural movement bent on reviving Irish traditions and the Irish tongue. Near the end of Joyce's chapter on rhetoric, Professor McHugh quotes from a speech made a man named John Taylor to defend this revival against one of its haughty Anglophilic critics. In defending the new movement, Taylor compares this critic to an ancient Egyptian high priest in the time of Moses, and he impersonates the voice of the priest scornfully addressing the Jewish people: "Why will you Jews not accept our culture, our religion and our language? You are a tribe of nomad herdsmen: we are a mighty people. . . . You have but emerged from primitive conditions: we have a literature, a priesthood, an agelong history and a polity." But—Taylor now speaks in his voice—

But ladies and gentlemen, had the youthful Moses listened to and accepted that

view of life, had he bowed his head and bowed his will and bowed his spirit

before that arrogant admonition, he would never have brought the chosen people

out of their house of bondage, nor followed the pillar of the cloud by day. He

would never have spoken with the Eternal amid lightnings on Sinai's

mountaintop nor ever have come down with the light of inspiration shining in

his countenance and bearing in his arms the tables of the law, graven in the

language of the outlaw.

Here is a great speech, a moving speech, a moving affirmation of the Irish yearning to speak their own language and to regain their own culture in their own land—an affirmation couched in terms of the ancient Jewish struggle for freedom from persecution and contempt, liberation from the house of bondage. In this case, the parallel structure of the phrasing—bowed his head and bowed his will and bowed his spirit--reinforces the parallel between the Irish and the Jews. This is language that might easily carry us away, especially if we happen to be Jewish or Irish, if only by descent.

But a careful reading of this passage in its context reveals that the whole thing is undermined by irony. It is first of all wonderfully ironic that a speech made to defend the revival of the Irish tongue should exemplify the

eloquence of the *English* language: the language Joyce himself loved far above Irish, which he knew was a cultural trap for any writer bent on reaching a worldwide audience. Secondly, and more importantly, the sentimental twinning of the Irish and the Jews is undermined throughout Joyce's novel by the anti-Semitism of the Irish: by the negligence and contempt that Leopold Bloom faces throughout his day in Dublin because he is taken for a Jew; later on in a pub he will be harassed by a roaring drunk who personifies the most virulent forms of Irish nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. Joyce thus reminds us that nothing is more dangerous and more seductive than the rhetoric of nationalism.

Writing *Ulysses* during the years of World War I, Joyce could not foresee the horrors of the second great war, the megalomania of Hitler's nationalism, the appalling ruthlessness of his "final solution" to the Jewish problem. But *Ulysses* offers a radically different solution to this problem, for among many other things, its final section tries to imagine a conversation between a Catholic and a Jew, or more precisely between an ex-Roman Catholic and a middle-aged Irishman of no religious affiliation who is descended from Hungarian Jews and is therefore thought to be Jewish by everyone who knows him. Stephen and Bloom never reach a perfect understanding, but they do spend much of the night talking to each other on just about every subject under the sun, including of course Judaism and Christianity.

In talking to each other, they tell us something about the language of conversation, which ,moves beyond the rhetoric of the speech. At its best, conversation is a language of reciprocity, intimacy, accommodation. It teaches us how to listen, how to see things from another's point of view. Anyone who yearns to master the arts of speaking and writing must learn to hear the sound of other voices, voices that challenge, invade, and thereby enrich our own. To speak and write well, we must read much and listen well, and never stop learning.