

The Rhetoric of RHETORIC

*The Quest for Effective
Communication*

Wayne C. Booth

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 rhetickery, 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)

- “Rhetoric is that which creates an informed appetite for the good.” (Richard Weaver, 1948)
- “Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.” (Kenneth Burke, 1950)
- “Rhetoric is the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse . . . the art of probing what we believe we *ought* to believe, rather than proving what is true according to abstract methods.” (Wayne Booth, 1964)
- “Rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.” (Lloyd Bitzer, 1968)
- “We should not neglect rhetoric’s importance, as if it were simply a formal superstructure or technique exterior to the essential activity. Rhetoric is something decisive in society. . . . [T]here are no politics, there is no society without rhetoric, without the force of rhetoric.” (Jacques Derrida, 1990)
- “Rhetoric is the art, practice, and study of [all] human communication.” (Andrea Lunsford, 1995)
- “Rhetoric appears as the connective tissue peculiar to civil society and to its proper finalities, happiness and political peace *hic et nunc*.” (Marc Fumaroli, 1999)

Though many rhetoricians today still reserve some intellectual corners for other modes of thought about communication, all of us view rhetoric as not reducible to the mere cosmetics of real truth or solid argument: it can in itself be a mode of genuine inquiry. As Umberto Eco puts it, though rhetoric is often “degenerated” discourse, it is often “creative.”⁶

The painful fact remains that despite the flowering of interest that we come to in the next chapter, rhetoricians still represent a tiny minority on the academic scene. Most serious books in most fields

still have no reference to rhetoric at all, and those that refer to it usually do so dismissively. Even works by professional rhetoricians are often deliberately mislabeled. A colleague recently informed me that his last three books, all of them originally employing “rhetoric” in their titles, had been retitled by the publishers, since rhetorical terms would downgrade the text and reduce sales!

Imagine how those commerce-driven publishers would react to my celebration of rhetoric here: “If you expand the term to cover all attempts at effective communication, good and bad – the entire range of resources we rely on, whenever we try to communicate *anything* effectively – doesn’t it become meaningless, pointless? Surely you cannot claim that the shoddy rhetoric people object to shouldn’t be called *rhetoric*.”

As I said earlier, that objection is partly justified: “rhetoric” must include not only “the art of *removing* misunderstanding” but also the symbolic arts of *producing* misunderstanding. Employing the term rhetickery for the worst forms can’t disguise the fact that much of what we find repulsive is a form of rhetoric.

Another major ambiguity in expanding “rhetoric” to cover all efforts at communication is that it muddies the distinction between the *art* of rhetoric and the *study* of the art. The practice of rhetoric is not the same as the systematic effort to study and improve that practice. When I say “My field is rhetoric,” what will my colleague in the philosophy department hear? “So you are a preacher of the arts that have nothing to do with truth, only persuasion? Do you deserve a professorship here for doing *that*?”

I see no escape from that ambiguity. But we can at least distinguish the *rhetor* – each of us, in and out of the academy, saying or writing this or that to produce some effect on some audience – from the *rhetorician*, the would-be scholar who studies the most effective forms of communication. To study the rhetoric of rhetoric is one thing; to work as a rhetor, as I am doing most of the time here – arguing for, sometimes even preaching about, the importance of that kind of study – is quite different. Yet we all often travel under the same term: “My field is rhetoric.”

I thus hope that it will be useful to introduce a third term, covering those rhetors and rhetoricians who see their center as not just how to persuade effectively but how to practice listening-rhetoric (LR) at the deepest possible level. When LR is pushed to its fullest possibilities, opponents in any controversy listen to each other not only to persuade better but also to find the common ground behind the conflict. They pursue the shared assumptions (beliefs, faiths, warrants, commonplaces) that both sides depend on as they pursue their attacks and disagreements. So we need a new term, *rhetorology*, for this deepest practice of LR: not just distinguishing defensible and indefensible forms of rhetoric but attempting to lead both sides in any dispute to discover the ground they share – thus reducing pointless dispute.⁷ This point becomes the center of the final chapter.

The term may seem to you a bit silly, but before you reject it, just think about the history of other -logies: socio-logy, theo-logy, anthropo-logy, bio-logy, psycho-logy, neuro-logy, musico-logy, gastroentero-logy, ideo-logy, and so on. If you can think of a better term for the deepest rhetorical probing, pass it along. There are indeed other terms in many fields that are intended to overlap with my rhetorology: hermeneutics, dialogics, problematology, social knowledge, even “philosophy of discourse.”⁸ As I explore further in chapter 4, the best thinkers in most fields have often concentrated on rhetorical and rhetorological territory, with or without acknowledging their kinship.

Since rhetorical terms are so ambiguous, it will be useful to rely throughout on the following summary of the distinctions I've suggested:

Rhetoric: The whole range of arts not only of persuasion but also of producing or reducing misunderstanding.

Listening-rhetoric (LR): The whole range of communicative arts for reducing misunderstanding by paying full attention to opposing views.

Rhetrickery: The whole range of shoddy, dishonest communicative arts producing misunderstanding – along with other harmful results. The arts of making the worse seem the better cause.

Rhetorology: The deepest form of LR: the systematic probing for “common ground.”

Rhetor: The communicator, the persuader or understander.

Rhetorician: The student of such communication.

Rhetorologist: The rhetorician who practices rhetorology, pursuing common ground on the assumption – often disappointed – that disputants can be led into mutual understanding.

Obvious Synonyms

Much of the annoyance with rhetorical studies springs from the fact that rhetoricians can be said to steal subjects from various other “fields.” Most obviously, rhetoric covers what others call “English Studies,” “Composition Studies,” “Communication Studies,” or “Speech and Communication.” In a work celebrating the achievement of a major British thinker about how to teach writing skills in English,¹⁰ most of the essays could be described as about how to teach good rhetoric rather than bad. But the word “rhetoric” is hardly mentioned. The journal *College Composition and Communication* was for decades the center of education in rhetorical studies in America; but only rarely did a paper appear in it with a title like my “The Rhetorical Stance” (1963).

What about non-academic synonyms? Everyday language includes many synonyms for defensible rhetoric: *sound point*, *cogent argument*, *forceful language*, *valid proof* – and on through terms for style: *graceful*, *subtle*, *supple*, *elegant*, *polished*, *felicitous*, *deeply moving*, *beautiful*. Some even praise an outburst as *eloquent* without meaning to suggest excessiveness or the dodging of rationality.

We have an even longer list for the bad stuff: *propaganda*, *bombast*, *jargon*, *gibberish*, *rant*, *guff*, *twaddle*, *grandiloquence*, *purple prose*, *sleaze*,

crud, bullshit, crap, ranting, gutsy gambit, palaver, fluff, prattle, scrabble, harangue, tirade, verbiage, balderdash, rodomontade, flapdoodle, nonsense: “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

These synonyms dramatize once again why rhetoric has no single territory but covers almost everything, including the ethical judgments we come to in chapter 3.

How Do Different Rhetorics Not Only Reflect Realities but Make Them, Whether Ethically or Unethically?

Even among the new celebrators of rhetorical studies, many still treat it as only reflecting realities or truths derived by other methods. But we universalists insist that if we think of reality as consisting of any “fact” about “the world,” including how we feel about it and how we react to it, it is clear that rhetoric *makes* a vast part of our realities.¹¹ Reality was changed not just by the fact that your roof leaked in the rainstorm last night but by the way you and your spouse discussed what to do about it and whether you are now cheerful or gloomy. This point must be stressed at some length here, because it is essential to my central thesis: when we neglect the study of how to improve rhetorical *makings*, we are in trouble.

To clarify that point we must distinguish sharply among three realities.

Reality One: Permanent, Unchangeable, Non-Contingent Truth

We embrace many realities that were not made by rhetoric, only reflected by it and too often distorted by it. Is the earth really a sphere and not flat? Will it ever turn out to have been true that it was flat? Obviously not, even if the sphere gets shattered or everyone decides that the flat-earthists were right after all. Are the truths about the universe's origins that cosmologists are seeking temporary? No, only this or that version is temporary: the actual truth that is sought has been “there” from “the beginning,” awaiting our discovery, and will

be there whether we find it or not. If I drop a teacup on the floor, its splintering was not made by anything but the non-contingent truths about ceramics and gravity. Only explanations offered about my carelessness or anger in dropping the cup depend on rhetoric.

The history of philosophy has been full of debates about whether some value judgments deserve to be added to this category of hard, unchangeable fact. Saving that issue for chapter 4, I must confess here, as much of my previous work reveals, that I am strongly on the “Platonic” side: torturing a child to death for the sheer pleasure of it is *always* wrong, and that *fact* will never be changed by any form of rhetoric. Slavery will *always* be wrong, no matter how many cultures practice it. Though rhetoric is needed to change minds about such truths – they're only in effect discovered through centuries of catastrophe and discussion about it – they are for me still part of unchangeable reality. I hope that you would join me in automatically ruling out any defense of a pleasure-motivated child-murder that depended on an effort to prove that such infanticide is simply acceptable, in some circumstances, since we can't prove our moral case scientifically. Can you join me in claiming that no amount of future rhetoric will justify slavery, even if this or that culture becomes convinced that it is needed and thus justified?¹²

My case here will of course be rejected by skeptics and utter relativists, and by some social constructionists who argue that even our deepest values are totally contingent. But even if one of them were so clever as to change your mind or mine, that would not change the ethical facts about child-abuse or slavery.

To defend such joining with most Platonists and many theologians – “many truths, even ethical judgments, preexist before any discovery or ‘making’ of them” – would require a book-long philosophical/rhetorical treatise. But it is important to repeat that current critics of rhetoric are wrong when they tie it to the claim that everything is totally contingent.¹³ Rhetoric did make the reality of our discovery, but it did not make the ethical truth itself.

Thus while rhetoric has created many *temporary* realities – hard but temporary facts of the times: this war, that truce – it finally sometimes

discovers innumerable *unconditional* truths. It then, with its diverse forms of making, converts more and more into believing them.

In short, rhetoric does not *make* Reality One, Unchangeable Truths. It aids us in discovering them, as it makes and remakes our circumstances and beliefs – our temporary realities – along the way.

Reality Two: Realities Changeable but Still Not Created by Rhetoric: The History of How Nature Moves from Contingency to Contingency

The cosmos changes its contingent facts every moment: it was a hard reality yesterday that Mountain X had a peak of 10,303 feet above sea level; but this morning the reality is that its peak has been nipped off by a volcano blast, reducing the elevation to 9,702 feet, while the facts about the valley below are being transformed as the lava flows. The tornado that struck last night changed the reality of the village it destroyed, though the hard truths (Reality One) about what makes a tornado were overseeing the whole shifting show. (The fact that scientists' convictions about those truths shift from "paradigm" to "paradigm," generation by generation, does not change this point; the full actualities of Nature being studied do not change simply because scientific rhetoric changes.)

Reality Three: Contingent Realities about Our Lives: Created Realities that are then Subject to Further Change

To be sure, many of our daily changes do qualify as realities not made by rhetoric. The gravity and slippery ice that pulled me down and broke my rib produced radical changes in the way I slept and walked, for months. But the way my wife and doctor talked with me about it changed the reality of how I felt and acted. Our lives are often overwhelmed by such rhetorical changes of reality:

- Hitler's rhetoric – along with the rhetoric of many others – *made*, or *created*, World War II. The rhetoric of President Bush, Prime

Minister Blair, and Saddam Hussein *made* the Iraq war of spring 2003, with each side blaming the rhetoric of the other side.

- Churchill's rhetoric *created* a radically different World War II than would have been created if Chamberlain had remained prime minister.
- President Kennedy's rhetoric (and that of his opponents) *created* our escape from the Cuban missile crisis.
- Persuading your husband two years ago to accept the advice of architect X rather than the advice of architect Y *created* the reality of your living room and bathroom right now.
- A speaker's blurting out a forbidden epithet or misunderstood word can change the reality not only of the audience's view of that speaker – he's now a villain – but the reality of how he and others will be treated in the future. Most writers in America now avoid the word "niggardly," because of widespread protests identifying it with "nigger." Sooner or later dictionaries – reflectors of vocabulary reality – will warn against it. Our speech codes are changed daily by how we obey or violate them.
- A speaker's playful or ironic speculation can create awful realities. On November 20, 2002, a journalist, writing about the controversy in Nigeria over whether the Miss World contest should be held there, playfully speculated that if Mohammed were alive he might choose Miss World as an additional wife. Reports said that the protest riots had killed at least 220 and injured another 500. A sentence or two changed the reality not just of those killed or injured but of thousands of others.
- The rhetoric of legislators (and of those who lobby them, and of those who pay the lobbyists) creates the votes that recreate society.
- Controversy about whether the huge Millennium Dome south of the Thames was a good or bad idea will probably long continue, but that invention and the claims about its failure are now part of a new reality that would not be here without the role of rhetoric. This is not to deny that the actual construction – the interlocking of steel beams and painting of walls – was usually not rhetorical

but mainly dependent on the unchanging rules of mechanics. But even in choices about what to hammer or how to pour the cement, we can be sure that rhetorical exchanges among workers figured at every moment, changing Reality Three.

Offering such obvious examples from our factual world is not to claim that rhetoric was the only factor in those creations. The point is to call for more open acknowledgment of how rhetoric is to be praised, or blamed, for the makings.

One central question of this chapter – how do we decide whether such creations are defensible or indefensible? – leads to many problems, including debates about objectivity and subjectivity.

We may not want to call the realities made by rhetoric “objective,” because we always have only our “subjective” pictures of them: this point has been stressed by many postmodernist social constructionists. The constructions can be encountered and tested only in our experience, and our experience always relies on subjective assumptions. Precisely what realities were created by World War II, rhetorically or militarily, can never be fully pinned down in any one account. But even though our descriptions will vary, the realities made by war-rhetoric then and now are – to repeat – *real*, as is the existence of your present domicile and the Millennium Dome. That their reality might be destroyed by further rhetoric in the future does not in any way undermine the key point here: *rhetoric makes realities, however temporary*. And meanwhile it creates a multiplicity of judgments about what the realities *really* are. After every election or every war, there is never full agreement about what new reality has been created.

In short, it is not just that rhetoric makes many realities: study of rhetorical issues is our best resource for distinguishing the good makings from the bad. As postmodernist Marxists like Louis Althusser have claimed that “ideology” makes, or changes, realities, and linguists and philosophers have increasingly emphasized how “language-games” make realities, they have dramatized (sometimes unwittingly) our need for effective ways to distinguish the good makings from the bad.

How Rhetoric Relates to Three Sub-Kinds of Rhetoric-Made Realities

Contingent realities made by rhetoric have been variously classified by all rhetoricians, most often following Aristotle’s distinction of three kinds:

- *Deliberative* – attempts to make the future. Politicians or committee members debate about how to act or vote; husbands and wives and architects debate about house remodeling.
- *Forensic* – attempts to change what we see as truth about the past (attempts which may of course also affect the future). A lawyer skillful in rhetoric can sometimes make it clear that a death penalty decision for murder was false, thus creating a new reality – for defendants, prosecutors, victims, and their families. Historians can debate about how much blame to give Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon for the Vietnam fiasco.
- *Epideictic* – attempts to reshape views of the present. An orator or birthday-party friend can change the reality of how we value people and their creations. A hero can be revealed as a con artist, or a CEO turned from hero to villain. A widely mocked art movement can be turned into a celebrated artistic revolution.

Obviously all three of these can have effects on the other two, but the distinction can be quite useful, both as the rhetor tries to decide what to say and as the critic of rhetoric tries to decide whether a given rhetorical stroke deserves praise. An epideictic stroke useful *now* in changing a vote can prove contemptible if judged as deliberative.

What has been too often overlooked or understated in rhetorical studies is that when our words and images remake our past, present, or future, they also remake the personae of those of us who accept the new realities. You and I are remade as we encounter the remakings. And that remaking can be either beneficial or disastrous. In short, rhetoric of all three traditional kinds creates a fourth kind: the

character, the *ethos*, of those who engage with it. This is why the quality of our citizenry depends on whether their education has concentrated on the productive forms of rhetorical engagement.

Distinction of Domains

Adding to the problem of defining these three different kinds – whole books have been written on the differences – is the fact that rhetorical standards and methods contrast sharply, depending on differences in what Kenneth Burke called the “scene” and others have called the “culture” or “discourse community.” Everyone lives in a different version of what I choose to call the “rhetorical domain,” narrow or broad: the community that preaches and practices rhetorical standards that contrast sharply with the standards embraced by those in other domains.¹⁴

All successful communication within any given domain will depend on tacit shared assumptions about standards and methods, including what Stephen Toulmin taught us to call “warrants.” Some domains are huge, some tiny. Almost everyone in American journalism, for example, abides by the rule, “Never report it if a political leader uses the word ‘cunt.’” A somewhat smaller group – the most “respectable” journals – cannot even use “fuck” or “shit.” Meanwhile the standards in some journals, like the *New Yorker*, and in most British journalistic domains, are much looser. But the differences are far broader than about mere obscenities. Everybody obeys different standards depending on audience differences. Do I write “it’s” or “it is”? Do I begin the sentence with “But” or reserve “however” to follow the first phrase? Reporters all claim that the persona of a president, chatting on a plane trip, is totally different from the one he presents before a microphone. Secular newspapers assume readers who assume that when a “scientific study” releases a report, the report must be reported, not just as newsworthy but as probably valid. News addressed to this or that fundamentalist group will assume, in contrast, that if a “scientific study” contradicts religious

belief, it should be either ignored or attacked. Members of a Buddhist community in Tibet will depend on standards sharply different from those in an Amish community in Iowa. Members of a street gang will reject as bullshit the language that a prosecutor uses in charges made against them before a judge, while the judge considers much of their language (if recorded on a tape behind their backs) unintelligible – not just in pronunciation but in vocabulary.

Thus every society shares some rhetorical standards, while actually possessing a variety of sub-domains with different standards. A hard-nosed scientist appearing before a judge or a government committee will face entirely different argument standards from those she faces when writing her research paper. And standards will differ even in different sections of the same journal. What makes good rhetoric on the front page of your local newspaper will differ sharply from the style of the sports section or business section or editorial page.

A prime example of how wide the differences can be even among those who think of themselves as dwelling in the same domain is the contrast among academic disciplines. Critics outside the academy tend to assume that academese is one thing, public discourse another. But in fact there are major differences of standards ranging from field to field: what constitutes evidence or valid argument, what questions are worth asking, what choices of style will work or even be understood, which authorities can be trusted, how much eloquence is permitted. Even in large loosely defined fields like English, where people quarrel about discourse norms, there are underlying “warrants” or “commonplaces” that are taken for granted as not requiring discussion; in some other fields those “unquestionable” warrants will not only be questioned but sometimes openly rejected as totally unreliable. Most authors in the hard sciences assume, without bothering to argue about it, that hard data are required to make a case. They will be suspicious of historians’ assumption that quotation and citations provide adequate evidence for any conclusion. Authors in this or that branch of sociology will assume different standards for what is self-evident and needs no proof.¹⁵ The rhetoric effective in a journal called *Deconstruction* or *Culture Studies* will differ

greatly from what is effective in the *Journal of Economics*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, or even something as broad as *The Economist*.

The borderline between some domains within a given culture can be extremely hazy. It can often invite clever satire, when those committed to one domain express contempt for another by parodying its style. Perhaps the most effective rhetorical stroke of this kind in recent years was that of the physicist Alan D. Sokal, in an ironic article that became known as the “Sokal Hoax.” Annoyed by what he saw as a radical decline in argument standards in some branches of the humanities, he submitted to the journal *Social Text* an elaborate “demonstration” that all truths, even the “hardest” scientific truths, are not objective but just socially constructed. The careless editors overlooked his hundreds of obvious clues to his satirical point, printed the article, and Sokal quickly became famous for exposing the contemptible standards in that domain.¹⁶ He later described his spoof this way:

To test the prevailing intellectual standards [in that domain], I decided to try a modest... experiment. Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies... publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions?... Why did I do it? While my method was satirical, my motivation is utterly serious. What concerns me is the proliferation, not just of nonsense and sloppy thinking *per se*, but of a particular kind of nonsense and sloppy thinking.¹⁷

Sokal thus dramatizes his contempt for the argument standards of those connected with a journal like *Social Text*; for him much of what they publish is no more than rhetrickery. In my view, however, his attack struck home not because that opposing domain has no validity whatever but because the editors of the journal were *for that moment* carelessly failing to employ their own real standards. Because the essay seemed to validate their convictions, they failed to study the rhetoric carefully. They later apologized – not very persuasively, as I see it.

The point about contrasting domains can be illustrated even within the community of those of us who actively study rhetoric. We too often think and write as if we communicate in a domain self-evidently superior to all those other domains “out there” – as if to say:

By studying rhetoric decade by decade, we have developed standards of argument superior to everyone else's. What is really good rhetoric, according to our heroic teachers, might just puzzle those ignorant of the tradition.

But that domain is not as clearly defined as we might wish, or claim. History reveals endless quarrels among rhetoricians who embrace rival superior domains: “Unlike the rest of you, we have found the one true set of rhetorical standards.” I'm sure that some of what I say later about “rhetorology” will inevitably appear to some as foolishly elitist, or just plain puzzling.

What is inescapable is that underlying all our differences about what makes good communication there is one deep standard: agreement that whatever the dispute, whatever the language standards, communication can be improved by *listening to the other side, and then listening even harder to one's own responses*.

Obviously, saying that does imply a judgment of domains: whenever we manage to listen first and continue listening, we are far superior as rhetors than when we aim our words at targets that don't exist. The thesis of this book might thus be reduced to: Let us all attempt to enlarge the “domain” of those who work to avoid misunderstanding. (In chapter 7 we will face the major “domain revolution”: the expansion of the TV audience to include the whole world.) Even though rhetoric will never have a single definition, and even though conflicting domains will always frustrate our efforts to communicate, there are ways to escape, in every corner of our lives, the popular degradations of rhetoric. Practice LR!

Will that practice remove the problems of rhetoric? Obviously not. Even the most skillful pursuers of LR, considering it the supreme rhetorical art, encounter nasty problems – especially when what is

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

heard is an unwavering threat, explicit or implicit: an implacable demand for caving in or self-censorship. We will face some of those problems throughout, especially when dealing with political rhetoric. Again and again I catch myself with the question, "Have you really listened hard enough, deeply enough, to your target here?" And the answer is too often, "No."