

## The Rhetoric between the Lines

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As though anticipating the theme of the 2012 Congress of the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences and of our own Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric special session there, contributors to the fourth volume of the CSSR journal have by chance converged upon “uncertainty” as a common focus in these diverse, engaging articles. Our authors shed light upon rhetorical artefacts that are often contradictory, ambiguous, or veiled, so that their persuasive intent is not always immediately apparent. The oblique nature of the discourses they examine, which are drawn from disparate historical and social traditions, requires some initiation into their context and a special knowledge that the writers have graciously shared with us. In these articles they discuss the objectives of language that conceals as much as it reveals. At times they look for what is not said in order to discover what is meant.

Our authors refer to many aspects of *ethos*: character, identity, position, roles, values, traditions, communities, and society. What do discursive strategies such as feigning, omission, or saying too little - or too much - contribute to the ethos of the speaker? Does the rhetor who uses such techniques remain “a good man speaking well?” Or was that just a noble, but naïve definition directed at young students of rhetoric who might be acquiring oratorical tricks to advance their law careers? Lying has never been part of the terminology of rhetoric, but there are ambiguous figures, irony, for example, which in Greek (*eirōneía*) signifies dissembling. Another, *dissimulatio*, means dissembling or concealment. However, rhetoric never promised truth; it

aimed at probability. This journal deals with the indirect types of rhetoric that achieve just that, nothing more certain.

On the other hand, rhetoric tells much more than the bare facts. Whether calling the current Canadian government “the Harper government,” or recalling the words attributed to Louis XIV, “L’État, c’est moi,” such figures of speech immediately convey the point of view of the speaker. A metaphor can lead the listener or reader to unimagined places, with new depth of understanding. Antithesis can reduce a matter to a polarized view. Irony says as much about the speaker as about the subject. Rhetorical strategies are therefore not so much devious as enlightening; they render discourse not misleading but transparent, not concealing but revelatory. It is regrettable that in the current political environment, rhetoric is not deceitful as much as it is simply pedestrian, hackneyed, inept, or mean-spirited. A striking metaphor, aphorism, or enthymeme is more likely to be uttered in the “coloured” language of a political satirist these days.

The analyses of the topics in the articles, ranging from ancient to more current subjects, suggest the readiness of writers to go beyond traditional rhetorical theory in their desire to discover motives in various discursive genres, whether communal deliberations, journalism, historical documents, letters, orations, narrative, or poetry. They willingly “read between the lines,” searching for new insights into how and why persuasive strategies are used, “decoding the imagining behind the discourse of another,” as journal contributor John Gooch says.

The subject of every article is distinct; and yet, if we approach each with an eye to the lack of transparency that the rhetors in these discourses display, we may discern a trend that reflects both the ambiguity of rhetorical language and the current scepticism that it breeds in

many of us. We live in uncertain times; but so did Homer, Luther, Lincoln, and the other speakers and writers referred to in these essays.

In the first article, “‘Je t’aime, Papa’: Theatricality and the Fifth Canon of Rhetoric in Justin Trudeau’s Eulogy for his Father, Pierre Elliott Trudeau,” Tracy Whalen investigates the sincerity of the former Canadian Prime Minister’s son in the televised presentation of his funeral oration in 2000. There was considerable controversy following the broadcast about the authenticity of this speech, and Whalen is cunningly thorough in offering enough opinion on both sides, from the media and those in attendance at the ceremony, to play down her own academically objective take on the eulogy. After all, there are times when withholding information can only be called discretion. Her rhetorical interests have frequently directed her attention to the fifth canon of the doctrine, *pronunciatio*. Here, she complements her detailed study of the facial expressions, gestures, and vocal inflections of the young Trudeau with plenty of historical information on delivery as well as a careful analysis of the text of this speech. The premise of the article is to question the extent to which the speaker was role-playing – whether his pathos-laden whispers, sighs, pauses, and tears, to name a few of the theatrical touches, were spontaneous and genuine, or whether he had crafted and rehearsed them, knowing that he would likely never have such an audience to impress again in his life. Whalen gives Trudeau the benefit of the doubt, respecting his obviously sincere familial love and never abusing the subject with cynicism or self-indulgent levity. Certainly our readers will want to run to YouTube at the conclusion of her work to see the video clip of the short but rhetorically saturated oration. Is it feigned?

One means of creating uncertainty is to circumnavigate the truth through the use of *meiosis*, the figures of speech that attenuate an idea. Sylvain Rheault's unusual alliance of rhetorical and existential theories in his article, "Théories ontologiques du combat appliquées aux discours sur la mission canadienne en Afghanistan," provides a useful tool with which to evaluate political discourse, or, to be more direct, to expose propaganda. Using the vocabulary of philosophers such as Karl Jasper, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Buber, and Simone Weil, he proves diagrammatically that which we all knew intellectually: war makes beings (living people) into "things" (dead bodies). His innovative diagrams thwart any devious rhetoric that might mitigate that serious fact in an almost mathematical certainty, explaining with geometrical shapes the cause and effect of various outcomes of military strategies. Then he applies his conclusions to the statements of Stephen Harper concerning the involvement of the Canadian armed forces in the war in Afghanistan, which he made following his visit there in 2007. Understatement (*meiosis*) and its opposite, which in this case is not really *hyperbole* but rather enhancement, is really a form of redefinition of terms that need to be reconsidered in the light of the reality of war. Employing terms like *hero*, *military aspects*, and *humanitarian side*, and referring to dead Canadian bodies as "*the fallen*," are rhetorical techniques intended to disguise the obvious fact that war is brutal. Does Rheault's visual rhetoric trump Harper's media oratory?

Bruce Dadey addresses a subject of special Canadian interest – native rhetorics. His argument is drawn primarily from the rhetorical practices of American Indians [sic], as distinct from those of European cultures, for example. He focuses on the relationship of the individual to the community and the place of narration in aboriginal negotiations. What we learn from his study, I think, should be considered seriously by academics, our current politicians, lawmakers, and administrators, and indeed by all of us in our interpersonal relations. In public discourse of

native cultures, “circumspect language,” which avoids naming a person, is the kind of indirectness that preserves dignity while it gets at the truth. Likewise, identifying the plausibility of the unlikely is treated with a respect that we may, in our more confrontational argumentation, see as unnecessary, even naïve. Dadey says in his discussion of the importance of narrative in native rhetorics, “In the oral tradition, good story-tellers do not tell all of the story.” This discretion results in a different approach to interpretation: “the point is not to fix text and meaning.” To allow such indeterminacy as a discursive virtue is either risky, or perhaps refreshingly sophisticated, depending upon our willingness to deliberate within different conventions. Dadey mentions the postmodern view of the indeterminacy of a text, perhaps indicating that tribal rhetorics have been ahead of the times in this regard. I wonder if we are ready to accommodate as rhetorical strategies what might seem like unnecessary repetition and delay in order to achieve satisfactory resolutions to disputes.

In the article by John Gooch, “Reading, Writing, and Imagining the Law: Using James Boyd White’s Theories as an Approach to Analyzing Legal Rhetoric,” we find the suggestion that “one can read legal documents, treatises, and even constitutions just as he or she reads poetry, prose, or drama.” White and Gooch even use the verbs *analyze*, *imagine*, and *interpret* in their approach to law, which they see “as an interaction of authoritative texts and as a process of legal thought and argument.” And these theories are compelling: the notion of “law in literature and law as literature” should be appealing to the rhetorical community. Gooch expands on *imagine* (what verb could be more ambiguous, more uncertain?) in his discussion of White’s theories. However, it is the example of Gooch’s application of them in an analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s 1857 “Dred Scott speech” that illustrates the effectiveness of White’s ideas. In that *Rhetor: Revue de la Société canadienne pour l’étude de la rhétorique* 4 (2011) <[www.cssr-scer.ca](http://www.cssr-scer.ca)>

discourse, Lincoln delivered a defense of the African-American slave Scott's right to freedom, which Missouri law had revoked. The oration, opposing the court's decision, is full of highly rhetorical, even poetic, language that draws upon texts familiar to and revered by an audience of that period. These include the Bible and the Declaration of Independence ("a document full of ambiguity and uncertainty," according to Gooch). The imagery is bold, the appeal to ethos and pathos almost overwhelming. The author's rhetorical analysis adds many layers to our understanding of both sides of this legal question, and to our appreciation of the importance of individual imagination and of narrative in deliberation.

Neil Leroux's subject is epistolary rhetoric. His article, "Pastor to the Pope: Martin Luther's Modeling of Proper Christian Service in *Epistola Lutheriana ad Leonem Decimum summum pontificem* (1520)," examines the conciliatory letter from Luther to the Pope following the latter's threat, in a papal bull, to excommunicate him. The document has secrets: the date of the letter was falsified so as to appear to predate the threat, and the purpose of the text is Janus-faced. Luther had no intention of recanting the criticism he had expressed for the papacy, but he wished to convey his good will and respect towards the Pope while maintaining his position that the pontiff was surrounded by corrupt officials. The letter, then, bears a subtext that could have had serious consequences for its author if the optimal balance of praise vs. blame were not achieved. Leroux's rhetorical analysis of the document covers every aspect of these binaries, especially Luther's flamboyant use of antithesis and metaphor that never allow the Pope to be contained within the sphere of the Curia, for whom Luther has nothing but the most caustic descriptors. He also shows how Luther used biblical authority and his extensive knowledge of Christian doctrine to enhance his own credibility throughout the letter, which serves both to

ameliorate the position of the humble writer and to offer a sincere warning to its august receiver.

How skilled was the Pope at reading between the lines?

Lyn Bennett's article, "Negotiating the Public and the Private: Rhetoric and Women's Poetry in Interregnum England," offers enlightenment to the domain of Women's Studies as well as to that of Rhetoric. Her study deals with the extent to which three seventeenth century female poets ("Eliza," An Collins, and Anna Trapnel) disguised their identity in both their lives and their writing. Their works are not figuratively extravagant as are those of such male authors of the period as Herbert, Donne, or Lovelace. Rather, their poetry balances a public agenda, which sometimes shows a strong political conviction, with a plainer, gentler stance that Bennett describes as participating in a "meditative tradition." While the speakers discussed in most of the articles in this issue are concerned about reputation and character, her poets intentionally "fashion" an "acceptable ethos," which aims to convince the reader of their religious commitment and sincerity more than of their virtuosity. Bennett discusses the phenomenon of concealment as it is in their poetry. She writes, "Eliza seems to know that successful persuasion depends on knowing what to hide and what to show, and she may also be aware that the simultaneous and contradictory demands of private concealment and public exposure inform every rhetorical act." That observation is, coincidentally, what alerted me to uncertainty as a common topos of all the articles in this journal.

I have left the most uncertain subject to the end. Stefano Dentice di Accadia Ammone's article, "La Rhétorique de Diomède et la 'seconde Épreuve' d'Agamemnon," analyzes an oration from Homer's *Iliad* that can be interpreted in its totality to mean the contrary of what it appears to propose. The speech in question occurs in Chant IX of the work, when Agamemnon addresses

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his army, exhorting the soldiers to retreat rather than to stay on and continue the war. Dentice describes the strategy employed in this passage as follows : « l'orateur traite de son objet non pas sous forme directe, mais sur un mode allusif, ou bien en feignant de poursuivre un objectif différent de celui qu'il entend en fait atteindre. » (“The orator does not treat his object in a direct manner, but in an indirect way, or else by pretending to pursue a different objective than that which he in fact means to attain.”) This simulation involves a complex rhetoric that will be followed and brought to its intended result by other speakers: Ulysses and Nestor. The article reveals the role of figured speech in military strategy, and as such, it reminds us of Sylvain's Rheault's article. In both cases, the commander in chief directs his logic in such a way that it appeals to the emotions and the ethos of the audience, but cannot in any way be seen as straightforward in itself.

It is disconcerting for one operating in a rhetorical tradition shaped by not only the principles of classical rhetoric but by the glorification of that system, to accept the gradual loosening of some of those principles. This is particularly true as the abandonment of its orderliness cannot be said to lead to success or to failure. Millennia pass with everyone practising rhetoric day to day, but not consciously aware of its existence. Perhaps this is why rhetoricians are such ardent defenders, even proselytizers, of the discipline. The more we know about it in this post-modern world, the more we want to explain it in familiar terms: define, divide, etc. The articles in this collection offer some disquieting challenges to those strategies.