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Author/s:

Hughes, J;Ford, T

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Rhetoric

Thomas H. Ford and Joe Hughes

Summary

Rhetoric was—or is, and the uncertainty here is to the point—an unstable but hegemonic assemblage of categories, practices, doctrines, and institutions that endured from classical antiquity through to modernity. Rhetoric underwent radical transformations over this period of nearly three thousand years, entering into complex relationships with its discursive and educational others, including literature, philosophy, theology, and science. Rhetoric has variously been the pragmatic art of verbal action; the teachable (and so saleable) skill of persuasive speaking; an elite training in literary forms and genres inherited from ancient Rome and Greece; a set of protocols governing textual production and reception; the antiquarian collection of ornate and artificial modes of phraseology; a transcendent spirit of linguistic articulation and creation; and a branch of instruction in professional communication. This article presents five scenes—sometimes more tightly focused, sometimes more diffuse—drawn from the long history of rhetoric: a moment of rhetoric's inception, in Syracuse in 466 BCE; of its Christianization, in Milan, 387; of linguistic productivity, in Cambridge, 1511; of rhetorical transcendence, in Basel in 1872; and of social composition, in Minneapolis, 1968. In each of these moments, rhetoric's conceptual, discursive, and institutional relations with literature were transfigured. They were scenes in which rhetoric was retied, so to speak, into a series of new knots with literature and philosophy. Other scenes and other itineraries would no doubt generate different stories—other knottings of rhetoric and its others.

Keywords

rhetoric, philosophy, literature, poetics, composition, invention, trope, figure, speech

Scenes from a History of Rhetoric

Rhetoric has many beginnings. Quintilian located one in Homer, who, as in his own description of Oceanus, must be understood as “the source of every stream and river.” As the sea from which all linguistic artistry flowed, Homer provided “a model and an inspiration for every department of eloquence.”¹ Jeffrey Walker locates a different moment of origin one generation after Homer. In the opening lines of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, a hymn to the muses, the eloquence they inspire is presented as an essential supplement to political power. The prince who is gifted with the power of speech, and from whose mouth flow honeyed words, will resolve conflicts and divisions quickly and skillfully. Such eloquence was at once poetic and political for Hesiod, testifying to an early indiscernibility between the literary and the rhetorical. The vocabulary Hesiod uses to describe the “flow” of honeyed speech points to a third beginning for rhetoric, one that concerns its conceptualization and naming. His terms all stem from the verb *rheō*: *rhēsis* (a speech or a declaration), *rhētos* (that which is spoken of), and *rhētra* (a verbal agreement or covenant).² Rhetoric would not be named as such for another four hundred years, when Plato, rhetoric’s first major opponent, described the art of Gorgias and his student Polus as an art of rhetoric, *technē rhētorikē*. Still underpinning Plato’s new term, however, was this literary prehistory in which rhetoric had once been indistinguishable from poetry.

From these early moments of origin on, the history of rhetoric has been shaped by repeated processes of demarcation, separation, identification, and reconnection. Through these new beginnings and reformulations, rhetoric was both constituted differentially, through opposition to its adjacent alternatives, and constituted as a discourse capable of reflecting on these others—whether literature, philosophy, science, or politics. In what follows this article tracks some of the different intersections and interfaces that have linked rhetoric to literature and its other others over the long histories of these two verbal arts. The story it tells is

necessarily selective and episodic, focusing on just five scenes in which the knot binding rhetoric to literature was tied in new ways that drew on new institutional locations and supports. The guiding question throughout concerns how rhetoric has thought about literature and its own relationship to the literary. How has it described literary forms and functions; how has it represented literature's specific being and effects?

Syracuse, 466 BCE

For the first four hundred years of its history, rhetoric was verbally indiscernible from its proximate others, including politics, poetry, and philosophy.³ Then, through the second half of the 5th century BCE, it underwent a process of semantic differentiation, extraction, and definition. That process arguably began in 466 BCE, two generations before Plato and three before Aristotle, with the expulsion of the tyrant Thrasybulus from Syracuse. As its leading citizens returned from exile, they made formal claims to recover lands that had been confiscated under the tyranny. Here, in the adversarial legal cases of newly re-established courts of law, another beginning for rhetoric might be located—one that would give rhetoric a consistent and enduring identity in verbal disagreement, and that oriented its persuasive means to the reinstitution of private property rather than to the advocacy of the collective goals of a polity or the ceremonial self-presentation of community. Rhetoric—not yet named as such—was here a specifically juridical discourse that took the form of an instrumental and oppositional use of language. It was *antilegein*: counter-talk, speaking against, or controversion.

The contestatory nature of this rhetoric is captured in a semi-legendary anecdote concerning two of rhetoric's Syracusan founding figures, Corax and his pupil Tisias. When Corax demanded payment for having taught Tisias the art of persuasion, Tisias supposedly

responded with a challenge: either I can persuade you that I owe you nothing, or I cannot, and if I cannot, then you haven't taught me how to win arguments, and so I owe you nothing. Corax inverts the formulation in his reply: if you lose, you have to pay me, and if you win, then I have indeed taught you the art of persuasion—and so you have to pay me. In some versions, the paradox plays out as a legal trial in which a judge dismisses both master and pupil with the comment: “bad crow [*corax*], bad egg.” The judge's play on words is in fact a Byzantine joke, one not found in rhetorical writing until a much later period, the second Sophistic of nearly one thousand years later. But it takes up a very old Sicilian joke dating from around a decade before Thrasybulus's expulsion. In Pindar's Olympian Ode II of 476 BCE—a poem composed in honor of another Sicilian tyrant—the raucous speech of the poet's rivals is compared to the cawing of a pair of crows who “fling forth . . . their futile, indiscriminate chatter/against the godlike bird of Zeus.”⁴ In this moment of origin, rhetoric was differentiated, mockingly, as the poor, juridical other of poetry. Who would take lessons in speaking from a crow, *corax*, when you could take flight with the eagle of poetry?

The perfect symmetry of the contending arguments in the Corax and Tisias story exemplifies rhetoric's capacity for counter-speaking, its instrumental availability to antithetical ends. Its paradox formally positions publicness as the domain of rhetorical speech, for neither side's argument is in itself paradoxical: they only enter into a logical paradox when seen together from the perspective of a third person. And the story also identifies rhetoric as a practice in which reason encounters its limits, subjecting language in public to the authority of a different medium, namely money. In its crystallization of these parameters, however, the story reflects the anxieties of later and much more systematic conceptions of rhetoric, which in the time of Corax and Tisias appears not yet to have been understood as an art or *techne*. The doctrines actually transmitted by Corax and Tisias are likely to have offered only “analytical and organizational guides”—somewhat ad hoc

codifications of norms of juridical discourse and legal presentation.⁵ But if the story reflects the concerns of a later age, it testifies nonetheless to the operation already in 466 BCE of an important distinction. The emergence of an institutionalized discourse on discourse is here clearly aligned with the adversarial model of the courtroom rather than with other available spaces of speech. Plato, writing in the next generation, would redeploy this tradition of counter-talking to draw a second distinction, this time to separate rhetoric from philosophy.

Plato's references to rhetorical textbooks and competing oratorical instructors indicate that the trade was now well established, testifying to a thriving commercial world of the arts of persuasion and speech-writing. At the same time that Plato bestows the name of "rhetoric" on this field in the *Gorgias*, he also positions it via a double negation, as neither poetry nor philosophy. The philosophical definition of rhetoric that follows is given through a complex series of interwoven distinctions. Like sophistry, rhetoric is epistemologically ungrounded: its availability to antithetical ends demonstrates its non-relation to truth. For Plato the sophist and the rhetorician are "closely related," Barbara Cassin explains, "working in the same sphere and upon the same subject matter," and so both can be opposed to philosophy, the discourse of *logos*.⁶ Sophistry and rhetoric are, specifically, sham arts of politics. But while sophistry is a sham of legislation, rhetoric is a sham of justice. The former devalues the constitution of the political community, while the latter devalues its internal redress of wrongs. Rhetoric is also like poetry. Both address the general public, which is why "the poets engage in rhetoric in the theatres."⁷ But whereas rhetoric addresses people in their capacity as political citizens—it is "addressed to the Athenian people and other free peoples in various cities"—poetry addresses people in their capacity purely as linguistic beings: it is "a form of rhetoric addressed to people composed alike of children and women and men, slaves and free—a form which we cannot much admire, for we describe it as a form of flattery."⁸

When Plato returns to the topic of rhetoric in a later dialogue, *Phaedrus*, he retains this classification of rhetoric together with sophistry and poetry as modes of non-philosophy. But here a new possibility is introduced, that of a properly systematic rhetoric which would truly be an art rather than merely impersonating one, and so could sustain inquiry into the truth of its subject matter and its audience. But were such an art to exist, Plato concludes, it would cease to be rhetoric and instead become philosophy. The same philosophical potential is likewise attributed to poetry and political sophistry. Socrates delivers a message, firstly, to Lysias, an orator, and to all other “composers of discourses”; secondly to Homer and all others who have written poetry; and thirdly to Solon and other writers of “political documents.” If any such wordsmith is capable of defending their writings when challenged, and if they have composed their works “with a knowledge of the truth,” then they should properly be called by another name: “wisdom’s lover—a philosopher.”⁹ So even as there is a proliferation of nameable discourses in Plato—politics, poetry, rhetoric, philosophy—only the latter is awarded a positive principle that allows it to maintain conceptual self-definition. Insofar as the others entertain a relation to the true, they are, in fact, philosophy. Only with Aristotle, a generation later, would rhetoric first receive a specific, positive principle of discursive self-identity, that of being dedicated to the detection of the persuasiveness of any given matter. Rhetoric, in other words, was not the art of persuasion but the discovery of possible means of persuasion. It was the inquiry into the persuasive force of the things at hand. And by establishing the first system of rhetoric on a positive principle in this way, Aristotle redrew rhetoric’s distinction not only from philosophy but also from poetics.

In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates had described rhetoric as the “counterpart (*antistrophos*) in the soul to pastry baking, its counterpart in the body.”¹⁰ The attractions of rhetoric lure the soul just as tasty cakes seduce the body. The opening sentence of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* declares that “rhetoric is a counterpart (*antistrophos*) of dialectic,” at once taking up and

violently redistributing Plato's terms. If rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic, rather than of gastronomy, it is because it too is now understood as maintaining a certain relation to truth. Both dialectic and rhetoric are for Aristotle species of syllogism; both are kinds of proof; in both kinds of proof, truth is at stake. Similarly, both rhetoric and dialectic cultivate the articulation of opposing positions, the two sides of an argument. And as Aristotle is at pains to emphasize in the opening pages of the *Rhetoric*, both belong to the class of syllogisms that reason not from "primitive and true" premises but from commonly held "reputable opinions."¹¹ Their domain is then not that of the specific sciences—medicine, mathematics, physics, and so on—but the entire field of "the given."¹²

Poetics for Aristotle is animated by a very different principle. Epic poetry, tragedy, comedy—even "music for the pipe or lyre"—are "all (taken together) *imitations*." Imitation is presented here as a kind of anthropological radical or singularity. It "comes naturally to human beings from childhood," in contrast to other animals, and humans take "universal pleasure" in it. Aristotle's brief gloss of this pleasure indicates both its proximity to the *Rhetoric* and its distance. If people "take delight" in seeing images, it is because "they come to understand and work out what each thing is (e.g. 'This is so-and-so')."¹³ But if this makes imitation a means of understanding—makes it like rhetoric in one way—it remains nonetheless essentially different because it proceeds by comparison and recognition rather than by proof. The various kinds of poetry, for example, are distinguished according to their different media, objects, and modes of imitation. In rhetoric, by contrast, it is a question of demonstrations from general topics. And while poetics is common and non-specific—generalizable—it does not occupy a field of representation that is universal in the same way that dialectic and rhetoric do. So while the domains of rhetoric and poetics overlap, their intersection is also circumscribed very precisely.

Tragedy as anatomized in the *Poetics* has six parts: plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*), diction or style (*lexis*), reasoning (*dianoia*), spectacle (*opsis*), and lyric (*melos*). Aristotle limits the point of intersection between rhetoric and poetry to only two of these: style and reasoning. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle emphasizes that neither style nor delivery have yet been objects of systematic study, and so his first move will be to outline their genealogy. Their beginning lies in poetry and in acting: “The poets, as was natural, were the first to give an impulse to style; for words are imitations, and the voice also which of all our parts is best adapted for imitation, was ready to hand; thus, the rhapsodists, actors, and others were fashioned.”¹⁴ Diction and delivery then ultimately refer back to the principle of mimesis, to the voice as the preeminent organ of imitation, and to a historical moment when rhetoric and poetics were still indistinguishable at the level of style. Jeffrey Walker has argued that it is easy to overstate Aristotle’s distinction between rhetoric and poetics, and that the *Poetics* in fact “presupposes a fundamentally rhetorical conception of poetic discourse” in its mode of address to the audience.¹⁵ But this passage from the *Rhetoric* suggests an inversion of Walker’s thesis. Rhetoric and poetics had been entangled since long before 466 BCE. The task as Aristotle now sees it is to separate them, to specify their singularity, to say what makes each what it is.

Style, Aristotle remarks, is governed by both historical and generic differences. Poets today, for instance, no longer speak the way they used to. The style of tragedy, meanwhile, is not yet prose style even as it gradually approaches it. In consequence, “we need not enter too precisely into all questions of style, but only those which concern such a style as we are discussing. As for the other kind of style, it has already been treated in the *Poetics*.”¹⁶ Rhetorical style must then be grasped as a late extraction from a larger history in which it is included, as an “other kind of style,” alongside poetry and drama. Rhetorical style is still style, still a question of an essential quality of speech that is originally located in the imitative

voice. But it is one that can now be reoriented toward a specific and non-poetic function, that of demonstration from common opinion.

In both the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, the first virtue of style is clarity, and in both texts the relative degree of clarity or obscurity is governed by a criterion of propriety. Style, whether poetic or rhetorical, should be appropriate to the matter at hand. But for precisely this reason, style has a very different function in each kind of speech. As he explains in the *Rhetoric*, a “speech that does not make its meaning clear, will not perform its proper function”; hence it should neither be “mean, nor above the dignity of the subject, but appropriate to it.”¹⁷ Rhetorical style thus aims at a stylistic mean, a middle level between the low style and the high. There are other uses of words, he continues, “which have been spoken of in the *Poetics* [and which] elevate and make it ornate; for departure from the ordinary makes it appear more dignified.”¹⁸ Indeed, in the *Poetics*, he began his discussion of style with what looks like a very similar principle: “the most important quality in diction is clarity, provided there is no loss of dignity.”¹⁹ But because the clearest speech is based on current words, he continues there, poetic diction is “distinguished when it makes use of exotic expressions.”²⁰ Poetic style should then be dignified, exotic, and ornate. Rhetorical style, by contrast, should be common, current, and clear. And this is because the kind of thing that rhetoric is—a general science of demonstration—is very different from the kind of thing that poetry is—an imitation of recognizable actions. “In poetry” he explains in the *Rhetoric*, many things “conduce to” the creation of a “foreign air,” because in poetry “the subjects and persons spoken of are more out of the common. But in prose such methods are appropriate in much fewer instances, for the subject is less elevated.”²¹

So style is common to poetics and rhetoric. Each presupposes a relation to style, and neither can be understood independently of it. And there is no doubt that rhetoric and poetics both operate in the sphere of language and are concerned with its fields of effects. But for

Aristotle, as for Plato, this by no means entails that poetics and rhetoric can be identified with each other. On the contrary, it is precisely because poetics and rhetoric share an ambiguous zone of indeterminacy that lines of demarcation need to be drawn. And through the drawing of these categorical distinctions, a third mode of linguistic practice also comes to find its vocation and specific mode of operation. The rhetorical practice of counter-talking first identified by Corax and Tisias—at least according to legend—then allowed both the differentiation of rhetoric from poetry and, when systematically applied to rhetoric itself, the constitution of philosophy.

Milan, 387

In the Easter of 387, Augustine was baptized by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, where Augustine had moved in 384 to take up a position as professor of rhetoric. “During those years I was a teacher of the art of public speaking,” he would relate in his *Confessions*: “Love of money had gained the better of me and for it I sold to others the means of coming off the better in debate.”²² As the political capital of a major part of the Western Empire and a frequent residence of the emperor, Milan was an important city at the time. In his role as professor, Augustine would have delivered official panegyrics on the emperor and other prominent leaders, leading one biographer to cast him as “Minister of Propaganda.”²³ But three years after his arrival came the day “when my release from the profession of rhetoric was to become a reality, just as, in my mind, I was free from it already. The deed was done, and you [the Lord] rescued my tongue, as you had already rescued my heart.”²⁴ For Augustine, entry into the Christian church involved the total abandonment of rhetoric. It was a liberation from an old rhetorical order that, while central to the pagan universe of knowledge, offered “no salvation.”²⁵ In Augustine’s narration, conversion takes hold of the heart and mind inwardly

first, before it can be realized in outer fact and by the tongue. But even as these sentences reject rhetoric, they also take it up anew, and not just in their measured syntactic parallels. For Christian love rescues language from rhetoric only for language to follow where the heart has first led, and so enter into the service of that love. Augustine, as James Murphy has written, “was, in a certain sense, converted from rhetoric to Christianity.”²⁶ But in another sense one might say that it was not so much Augustine converting to Christianity in 387 as rhetoric itself.

Augustine’s movements as a student and teacher—from Thagaste, his birthplace in North Africa, to Madaurus, Carthage, Rome, and then Milan—suggest how rhetoric continued to function in this moment of declining Roman political hegemony as a powerful pedagogical instrument of cultural and social cohesion. Augustine would have first studied and then taught a rhetorical curriculum that was largely standardized across the Mediterranean world of late antiquity. Without question, he read Cicero’s *De Inventione* closely, and most probably had also read the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetoric ad Herennium*—texts that would remain the basis of rhetorical education for the next thousand years and more, just as rhetoric would remain a key component of formal education throughout the Latin middle ages. Rhetoric, grammar, and dialectic together made up the trivium, the linguistic core of the liberal arts. Augustine’s education might then be taken as a blueprint for rhetorical instruction that was still being followed into early modernity and beyond. But even as these classical traditions were mediated and transmitted by Augustine, he also marked a sharp epistemological break with what would become, in consequence, the classical past. In reorienting rhetoric to the new purposes of Christian teaching, Augustine radically transformed the models he had been trained in and then professed. Rhetoric, like a converted sinner, had to undergo a symbolic death if it was to be reborn into new life.

Augustine undertook this task of transformation most systematically in his *De doctrina Christiana*—*On Christian Teaching* or *Doctrine*—the first three books of which were written in 396, and the fourth some thirty years later. Broadly speaking, the problem Augustine sought to resolve in *De doctrina* concerned the intellectual and educational basis for the Christian church's salvational calling. Somewhat more specifically, it was the question of how to deal with the vast and still powerfully vital cultural heritage of pagan rhetoric, philosophy, and poetry. On the one hand, these modes of knowledge had to be rejected absolutely. A Christian life was a wholly new life, one marked by a total break with the pagan past. When Cyprian, who like Augustine had been a teacher of rhetoric at Carthage, converted to Christianity, he “renounced profane letters completely and for the rest of his life never again quoted a pagan poet, rhetorician, or orator.”²⁷ This period in the history of the early church was also the highpoint of a homiletic, simple mode of preaching. Given the prominence of rhetorical training and speech in the culture at large, one might see in this ascetic, pared-back style a deliberately anti-oratorical mode of oratory. But on the other hand, Christianity also needed to assert its claims against the enduring prestige of classical models, and in doing so necessarily needed to operate within the terms provided by those models. Not only were apologists necessary who could defend Christianity at the level of theory. There was also the need to establish educational systems that would underwrite the intellectual continuity of Christian teachings across the increasingly fragmented spaces of the late empire and the increasingly long durations of post-apostolic time. Rhetoric was at once a threat to Christian cultural preeminence and an indispensable resource.

In *De doctrina*, this tension is formalized at the start of Book 1 as the paradox of a rhetoric of God—a rhetoric that is necessary yet impossible. It is impossible because God is beyond human language: “God is unspeakable [*deus ineffabilis*].”²⁸ And yet it is necessary because human language is all one has with which to speak of God: “the human condition

would be really forlorn if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency.”²⁹ Indeed, even to say that God is ineffable is in fact already to say something about him: “if what cannot be spoken is unspeakable, then it is not unspeakable, because it can actually be said to be unspeakable.”³⁰ As word made flesh, Christ is the messianic embrace of this paradox of an unspeakable divine speech. Book 1 is then dedicated to expounding the principle of love enjoined by Christ incarnate: the double love of God and of one’s neighbor.

Understanding God involves discovering the joy of divine love in a way that leads one to want to share it with others. The text recapitulates this double principle of love in its basic structural division into two parts. The first three books of *De doctrina* are devoted to divine love, which is to act as the paramount rule of interpretation in the understanding of scripture. Whenever one is confronted by an apparent textual ambiguity, for example, Augustine suggests resolving it by appealing to this principle of love or *caritas*. The correct meaning (and there can certainly be more than one for any given passage) is that which conforms to Christian love. Augustine then goes on in the shorter second part to address how one should present what one has learnt through this practice of interpretation to other people. It is in this second part that Augustine addresses the question of a Christian rhetoric most directly. But even as he relegates rhetoric to a belated and relatively minor second part, Augustine has also mobilized it at a structural level in the framing of this basic division of *De doctrina* into two parts. For the first part, he states in the opening sentence, will concern “the process of discovering [*modus inveniendi*] what we need to learn,” while the second addresses “the process of presenting [*modus proferendi*] what we have learnt.”³¹ In a complex redistribution of categories, this division between invention and presentation at once echoes and fundamentally alters the classical rhetorical divisions for making a speech. As laid out by Cicero, these “canons of rhetoric” begin with *inventio*—the discovery of potential

arguments—and then run through *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronuntiatio* (that is: arrangement, style, memory, and delivery). In effect, Augustine collapses these last four canons into a single doctrine dealing with the mode of expression or presentation. Rhetoric, understood as formal training in the production of speech, is relocated to this second part. *Inventio*, meanwhile, is reoriented away from the discovery of arguments that might persuade to become a practice of interpretation. Rhetoric is thereby split in two, corresponding to the double principle of Christian love, at once divine and human. One part remains known as “rhetoric” and plays an important but subordinate role in the communication of Christian teachings. The other, no longer labeled “rhetoric,” becomes the discovery of divine truth.

This Christian reinvention of *inventio* was also its textualization. Invention, as Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter have written, remained generative for Augustine, but “its weight has been shifted from generating arguments about a case to generating arguments about a text.”³² Rather than the public speaker of the classical tradition, the basic model of the language-user here is that of the Christian reader: a contemplative, inward, silent reader—someone like Ambrose, whose silent reading struck Augustine with the force of an epiphany. Inventional schemes are thereby reformulated as interpretative procedures. They are no longer ways of coming up with something to say but are instead ways of reading what the text says—a text “in which all truth has already been revealed, and whose correct interpretation is ultimately the responsibility of informed readers committed to its spiritual and moral teachings.”³³ And the textualization of invention was equally the stripping of invention from rhetoric more narrowly considered as the art of persuasive speech. For Quintilian, “ornamentation of speech contributes no small thing to the argument as well.”³⁴ And for Cicero, the stage of *inventio* included the articulation of the speech into its basic parts. Augustine broke this constructive link in which the articulation and expression of an

argument were considered as part of the discovery of the argument. In consequence, questions of elocutionary style took on a new meaning and texture.

In Book 4, Augustine rehearses the Ciceronian doctrine of the orator's three aims: to teach, to delight, and to move. These were classically aligned with a corresponding triad of low, middle, and high styles. Augustine summarizes: "in the restrained style he persuades people that what he says is true; in the grand style he persuades people to do what they knew to be necessary but were not doing; in the mixed style he persuades people that he is speaking attractively and elaborately."³⁵ Augustine is at some pains to show that all three styles are present in scripture. But his reason for this is not merely to legitimize scripture in the terms of classical decorum, although this is certainly something he achieves. For a properly Christian style scrambles these correspondences just as Christ transvalued all values, raising what was low and lowering what was high. As Erich Auerbach commented of Augustine's *sermo humilis*, in "the Christian context humble everyday things . . . lose their baseness and become compatible with the lofty style; and conversely . . . the highest mysteries of the faith may be set forth in the simple words of the lowly style which everyone can understand."³⁶ There are no small things, suitable for a low style, in Christianity, for all things could be signs of divine truth: "in our situation, since we must relate everything, especially what we say to congregations from our position of authority, to the well-being of human beings not in this temporary life but in eternity, where there is the added danger of eternal perdition, all matters that we speak of are important."³⁷ Christian speech then licenses not just a non-classical mixing of styles—"sometimes one speaks about one and the same important matter in all three styles"—but also the much more radical identification of high and low to be found "in the remarkable sublimity and the remarkable humility [*mirabili altitudine et mirabili humilitate*] of the scriptures."³⁸ The text of the scriptures is at once the object of interpretative discovery and the great storehouse of examples—the stylistic model—of a Christian rhetoric.

It is the dialectical resolution of linguistic humility and sublime altitude: of the modest, lowly, homiletic mode of preaching and the grand rhetorical tradition. In Auerbach's account, Augustine's everyday sublimity would go on to form the basis of European literature's experiments in realism over the next 1,500 years.

Can Christians practice rhetoric? Augustine answers: yes. Given that rhetoric can be used to give conviction to both truth and falsehood, Augustine asks, "who could dare maintain that truth, which depends on us for its defence, should stand unarmed in the fight against falsehood?"³⁹ One might recognize in this defense of rhetoric a Christian version of the paradox presented in the tale of Corax and Tisias—an anecdote that in fact appears to have emerged precisely at this time. The Corax and Tisias tale suggests an acute anxiety about the pragmatic availability of rhetoric which, as a combative art of language—a kind of tongue fu—can be used to speak with equal facility on both sides of any question. As Augustine notes, Cicero and other pagan teachers of rhetoric had sought to moderate this rhetorical potential for ungrounded counter-speaking by insisting that rhetorical training should always be supplemented by ethical education: "If the writers of textbooks on rhetoric were forced by the pressure of the truth to admit this even in their books on the subject, notwithstanding the fact that they had no knowledge of true wisdom—the heavenly wisdom that comes down from the father of light [*pater luminem*]⁴⁰—how much more vital is it for us, the sons and servants of this wisdom, to hold the same opinion?"⁴⁰ Augustine's reference to divine illumination here is also a play on words, paranomastically associating God with the rhetorical term for adornments of speech, *lumina dicendi*. This is how one speaks of an unspeakable God: purely rhetorically. The answer still held good when the question was reformulated in more literary terms over a thousand years later.

Cambridge, 1511

In 1511, Erasmus of Rotterdam was in Cambridge assisting John Colet set up St. Paul's School. Founded in 1509, St. Paul's was established on the ideals of humanist education, and its curriculum focused on classical languages and literatures, in particular Christian Latin literature. In 1511 Erasmus learned that a draft manuscript of his on the subject of copiousness in writing—a topic about which he had been writing since the late 1490s—was to be printed in Italy. Seeking to preempt this unauthorized publication, and realizing that the contents of such a book would be ideally suited to his work at St. Paul's, he quickly wrote what would become the first of many editions of *De copia*. His immediate intention appears merely to have been to create a text that could sit on the school's syllabus alongside his *De constructione*, a Latin syntax, and his *Adages*. But as Peter Mack has noted, *De copia* would rapidly become “the most printed of all renaissance rhetoric texts,” taught in schools and universities across Europe.⁴¹ The first version, published in Paris in 1512, was significantly revised and enlarged for the 1514 Strasbourg edition, and revised again for the Basel editions of 1517, 1526, and 1534. Over 150 editions would be published by 1560. The work was a pan-European phenomenon, and one shaped by the imperatives of two emergent and mutually supporting European institutions: the renaissance classroom, and the market, as it was manifested specifically in the academic book trade.⁴²

The text occupies an important place in the history of rhetoric for its unique synthesis of different rhetorical traditions. In it, the three main branches of late medieval rhetorical instruction—the arts of grammar, preaching, and letter-writing—were all reintegrated with revived systems drawn from classical rhetoric. Erasmus's synthesis, however, was not one of simple repetition, recovery, adjustment, and coordination. Rather, it established a new foundation for rhetoric, one that responded to the ruling tensions of the period and to the demands of a third institution—not emergent like the school and the market, but long-dominant—namely, the Church. In 1494, in the Groenendael Abbey just outside of Brussels,

Erasmus had first read Augustine's *De doctrina*. As Marc Fumaroli has recounted, *De doctrina* struck him with the force of a "revelation," sparking an "incessant meditation" across his *oeuvre* dedicated to the development of a distinctly anti-Ciceronian rhetoric built around the question of how to develop a "properly Christian culture of oratory."⁴³

That program would be fully developed in his two late works, the *Ecclesiastes* of 1535, a treatise on the art of preaching, which Fumaroli describes as an "immense gloss of *De doctrina*," and the *Ciceronianus* of 1528, a dialogue on the virtues and limits of Cicero's essentially pre-Christian rhetoric. But its foundations are already visible in the margins of *De copia*. Take, for example, its revisionary deployment of Quintilian. Quintilian had remained a surprisingly minor figure in medieval and renaissance rhetoric until his rediscovery in the 15th century, when the Italian humanists began piecing together fragments of the *Institutio Oratoria* and integrating its positions on education into their image of *humanitas*. Erasmus was one of the most influential figures in this recovery of Quintilian, whose reformulation of rhetoric as the civic education of the orator was repurposed by Erasmus in the service of a properly Christian oratory. In the first two books of the *Institutio*, originally published around 95, Quintilian had argued that rhetoric was neither good nor bad in itself; it was neither a counterpart of dialectic nor of baking; it was neither a species of philosophy nor of politics. It was, rather, the "science of speaking well."⁴⁴ Speaking—the faculty or power of speech—is what is most proper to humans, humanity's most basic virtue.⁴⁵ The science of this power, then, could not be a merely technical typology of language functions. It had to be grounded in the education of the orator understood as the cultivation of their power or virtue as a full human being—at once a form of practical wisdom and of contemplative knowledge. Indeed, if "the science of speaking well" was a good definition of rhetoric for Quintilian, this was because it included "all the virtues of oratory and the character of the orator (*mores oratoris*)

as well, since no man can speak well who is not good himself.”⁴⁶ In constructing the image of the ideal orator, Quintilian’s “first desire is that he should be a good man.”⁴⁷

In Quintilian’s emphasis on the virtue of the speaker, in the double sense of the word virtue—both power and moral uprightness—Erasmus found the means to achieve his synthesis. In the dedicatory epistle of *De copia*, addressed to John Colet, Erasmus emphasized this dimension—and apparently without menace—in stating that “the hope of the country lies in its youth—the crop in the blade, as it were.” The pedagogical program at St. Paul’s was designed to allow that crop to “absorb Christian principles together with an excellent literary education.”⁴⁸ One could argue that Erasmus’s entire project was to show that these two terms—Christian principles and an education in letters—were inseparable from one another. But how exactly does the text of *De copia*, in its restructuring of classical and medieval paradigms, advance that end? The answer to that question lies in its promotion of the idea of copiousness to a new foundation for rhetoric.

In his dedicatory epistle, Erasmus claims that he is the first “to envisage the subject and give an account of it.” He does not specify exactly where the novelty of his own approach lies, but he does provide two important indications. First, he accuses his predecessors of a certain unruly eclecticism and of bad Latin. Julius Pollux, for example, collected the figures of speech but only to group them in “neat piles,” and “as for the little book ascribed to Cicero,” it is merely a “patchwork” and “nothing more than a hurried compilation.” The implication is that, despite appearances, *De copia* is not a compilation of this kind. And although he will immediately apologize because, having had to rush the work to publication, it has still not received the “careful revision” that would give his “unsystematically amassed raw material” a final form, this anxiety only reaffirms the point in question.⁴⁹ Unlike Pollux or the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, *De copia* is based on a principle, however imperfectly realized. This is reflected in a second indication of the work’s novelty. As Terence Cave has

noted, Erasmus almost never refers to his work as belonging to the rhetorical arts.⁵⁰

“Rhetoric” appears nowhere in the title and in the text is used primarily to name the raw materials on which Erasmus is drawing.⁵¹ The word that does the semantic work that would typically be undertaken by “rhetoric” is instead *copia*. When Erasmus accuses Isadore of Seville and Marius of bad Latin, for instance, he describes them as being “so many removes from *copia*.”⁵² These two complaints directed at his predecessors imply a certain ideal. On the one hand, *copia* involves the systematic organization of figures and tropes rather than their mere collection. On the other, it is the art of good Latin. Together, these entail that *copia* is not an artful language so much as the very art of language as such—language systematically improved and refined.

In the opening chapters of *De copia*, Erasmus plays with the full semantic range of his keyword: nearly every possible connotation is invoked, however subtly. *Copia* is a matter of abundance, affluence, wealth, luxuriance, fertility, reproduction, copying, imitation; it is a question, even, of force, whether military, political or divine; those who possess it, he says, possess a “godlike power of speech.”⁵³ Erasmus’s favored images throughout, though, are aquatic: copious speech is like a “fountain,” a “torrent,” a swollen sea, a surging river of golden words. These latter images point to the center of his new articulation, for they emphasize not only the ideal of fluency but also the paradoxically unnatural nature of copious speech. *Copia* is a natural phenomenon but also one that is fluidly energized from within, almost as if unable to contain its own power. While the opening chapters of the introduction play with the field of sense that the word traverses, the final chapters isolate the principle that guides the book and that stands out against this broader semantic background: the cultivation of a natural power. The aim of the book, he repeatedly indicates here, is to “develop” (*paretur* and *proficiamus*) the “powers” (*facultas*) of expression.⁵⁴ So rather than being an art of persuasion, *copia* is instead the power, faculty, or potential to speak, and *De copia* is in

consequence dedicated to the elaboration of the technologies and patterns of this faculty's development.

The implications of this shift are far reaching. It is, first, what makes Erasmus's compendium more than a "neat pile" or unsystematic collection of tropes and figures of the type that had proliferated through the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. To the contrary, *De copia* has a consistent structure already visible in its full title: *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum* (On the twofold abundance of expressions and subjects). Copiousness is declared at the outset to be double, having two aspects, the first pertaining to words or expressions, the other to subject matters. This doubleness constitutes the principal division of the text into its two books: book 1 will deal with copious expression, book 2 with copious content. Each of those two books in turn will be filled with "examples and patterns."⁵⁵ So the piles of tropes and figures drawn extensively from the rhetorical tradition are all organized here according to a governing distinction between *res* and *verba*. That division itself, as Terence Cave has observed, corresponded ultimately to two of the five canons of rhetoric in the classical tradition, *inventio* and *elocutio* respectively.⁵⁶ The classical canons had been sequenced according to the different moments of the rhetorical situation, from the generation of content through to its delivery. Here, those five canons are reduced to two, with both being subject to a new principle, that of the productive power of language.

The second and more significant implication of this shift is that the very sense of the figures and tropes so organized has also been transformed. Metaphor, synonymy, catachresis, epanalepsis, *dubitiatio*: these are no longer descriptive categories that name a particular function of language or a specific field of effects, nor are they rules or norms that might be used to define or alternatively guide artful writing. They are now instead the forms of rhetorical generativity, naming different ways in which the student can maximize linguistic

productiveness. For Erasmus, then, linguistic power is augmented by its division, through processes of separation, duplication, and transformation.

Third, by identifying the principle of rhetoric with the power of speech as such, the conceptual, institutional, and historical forces that had separated rhetoric from poetry through the Latin Middle Ages could no longer draw support from rhetoric's operative self-definition. Instead, the lines between poetry and rhetoric begin to blur. There are four advantages to studying copious speech, Erasmus tells his reader: it will aid the development of style; it will help speakers improvise; and it will help students divert and adapt their speeches mid-stream should the occasion require it. Most significantly, he adds, the reader "shall also find it of great assistance in commenting on authors, translating books from foreign language, and writing verse."⁵⁷ Indeed, in the very next chapter, Erasmus advises his students to, "tear apart the fabric of poetry and reweave it as prose, and, vice versa, to bind the freer language of prose under the rules of metre, and also to *pour* the same subject-matter from one form of poetic container into another."⁵⁸ Poetics and rhetoric are no longer separate domains here. Each is instead grounded in the singular power of language, so that the study of one aids the performance of the other. Writing on this model becomes productively open-ended, with rhetorical invention leading into expansive vistas of poetic composition, and vice versa.

Erasmus's *De copia* might be seen, from this point of view, as planting the conceptual and systematic seed for the master trope of Elizabethan rhetoric. When Henry Peacham writes *The Garden of Eloquence* in 1593, or when George Gascoigne categorizes his *Poiesies* of 1573 as flowers, weeds, and herbs, they take up and reproduce Erasmus's new distribution. Literature as flower: this trope signals not that literature is a mere ornament, but that it is the form that carries nature and its inherent generative capacities to their highest degree of cultivation. The knot between poetry and rhetoric is retied by Erasmus in terms of the specifically linguistic productivity of spirit. But it is a curious relocation of the power of

speech, almost as if speech has turned inward. No longer directed toward the multitude—to a public situation of speech—it is now a question of the poet’s own power in relation to language. Decoupled from the political and juridical scene, rhetoric has its power reconceived as the cultivation of human nature. In the following centuries, as the natural sciences emerged, increasingly autonomous, from philosophy, Erasmus’s reformulation of rhetoric as humanist inward flourishing provided the basis for a corresponding new set of educational programs. The humanities of the modern university trace, as one of their origins, Erasmus’s reconception in 1511 of rhetoric as the generative power of human creativity.

Basel, 1872

In the winter semester of 1872–1873, Friedrich Nietzsche taught a course on rhetoric in his capacity as professor of philology at the University of Basel. Nietzsche’s legitimacy as a philologist had been publicly impugned following the publication earlier in 1872 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, which had been condemned as inaccurate, unscientific, and wildly rhetorical. In the controversy’s aftermath, his course on rhetoric was boycotted. Only two students attended, neither of them from the faculty of philology. Nietzsche relocated the lectures to his apartment, where his remarks were punctuated by draughts of beer from a silver cup. Rhetoric marked the low point of Nietzsche’s short academic career, and what the two students heard between drinks was highly conventional, even derivative. Much of Nietzsche’s lecture script was a cut-and-paste job of existing scholarship: a “collage” or “mosaic of quotations” that reproduced systems of rhetorical exposition often traceable right back to the ancients themselves.⁵⁹ But even as it presented yet one more repetition of this repetitive classical tradition, Nietzsche also told his two students that they were irrevocably severed from it by a historical break. Indeed, the derivative nature of Nietzsche’s presentation already

reflected his sense of rhetoric's fundamental intellectual insignificance in modernity—its decline into an arid province of antiquarian history meriting little attention.

There was nothing new to be said about rhetoric in 1872, nor even anything very original even in treating it as a subject of specifically historical interest rather than as a field of practical study and present application. Nietzsche likewise conformed to conventional thinking in remarking that the ancient ideal of rhetoric—in which it presented “the highest intellectual activity of the well-educated political human”—could not but seem “profoundly alien” to modern Europeans.⁶⁰ Modernity, in short, marked the end of rhetoric. And yet Nietzsche nonetheless transformed how this historical rupture should be understood by showing it to be radically ambiguous. On the one hand, rhetoric as it had been constituted through antiquity, the Middle Ages, and into the early modern period—as an educational program in the pragmatics of elite discursive power, and as a hegemonic division in the reproduction of literate knowledge—was clearly moribund. Nietzsche unequivocally assigned rhetoric in this sense “to the specific differences between the ancients and moderns.”⁶¹ But on the other hand, rhetoric's demise equally spelled its universalization. For the loss of rhetoric as a living theoretical practice also removed any implicit philosophical appeal to a counter-posed “unrhetorical ‘naturalness’ of language.”⁶² The end of rhetoric entailed that all words were actually tropes and all speech indelibly figurative. And in consequence, the power that Aristotle had associated with rhetorical art—“the power of discovering and asserting for each thing what is effective and makes an impression”—could now be revealed as being nothing less than “the essence of language” itself.⁶³

So Nietzsche's highly conventional treatment of rhetoric as historical—as over—nonetheless yielded an original and specifically modern philosophical insight, one he would go on to elaborate in his 1873 manuscript “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in which truth was presented as “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms,

anthropomorphisms.”⁶⁴ In recognizing truth to be necessarily rhetorical, modern philosophy performed its defining linguistic turn. For Nietzsche, as for his post-structuralist followers a century later, philosophy was thereby rededicated to the genealogical demolition of metaphysical ideas, which were to be exposed as congealed residues of language’s ceaselessly generative figurations. And in reconceiving of rhetoric in this way—expanding it from a specific art of tropes and figures out to the limits of language as such—Nietzsche also reconfigured the relationship between conceptual inquiry and aesthetic experience. To art was now attributed the function of tearing apart the existing “web of concepts” and of “presenting new transferences, metaphors, and metonyms,” “smashing and scorning the old conceptual barricades [in order] to correspond creatively to the impressions of the mighty present intuition.”⁶⁵ Art, in other words, was enrolled in the ever further extension of rhetoric’s “power of discovering and asserting for each thing what is effective and makes an impression.” Here, in the historical dialectic of rhetoric’s end and its linguistic universalization, one finds inscribed an influential version of literature’s modern vocation: namely that, through its presentation of dislocations and slippages within prevailing conceptual architectures, literature advances the reconciliation of thought with feeling, reassociating fragments of dissociated sensibility.

David L. Marshall has identified a recent shift in historical research on 18th-century rhetoric that broadly aligns with Nietzsche’s thesis of rhetoric’s dialectical end. Scholars have “begun to argue that, far from being cleanly excised, rhetorical inquiry was transformed between 1700 and 1800” across multiple fields of increasingly specialized aesthetic, social, political, and philosophical thought.⁶⁶ In place of “the end of rhetoric,” or of its “death” or “replacement,” such research tends instead to employ a vocabulary of rhetoric’s “transformation” or “sublimation.”⁶⁷ These new narratives then bring into sharper relief a paradox first delineated by Nietzsche, in which documents from the archive of rhetoric’s

modern obsolescence can also be comprehended in terms of its modern adaptations and extensions. The two authorities Nietzsche cited at the start of his first lecture to support his claim that Europe had entered a post-rhetorical epoch, Immanuel Kant and John Locke, are cases in point. For far from merely providing testimony about the death of rhetoric—which is essentially how Nietzsche presents them—these two enlightenment philosophers were also key agents of rhetoric’s modern universalization. Current research then corroborates Nietzsche’s dialectical thesis in ways unanticipated even by Nietzsche, overturning his readings of Kant and Locke in the course of advancing the broader historico-philosophical thesis that he had first sketched out.

Locke, who early in his career had been a lecturer of rhetoric at Oxford, condemned rhetoric in his 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a “powerful instrument of Error and Deceit.”⁶⁸ British enlightenment philosophy promoted a discursive ethos of plain speaking and common sense, a style often linked to the emergence of new modes of empirical scientific study and a new bourgeois structuring of subjectivity and society. “If we would speak of Things as they are,” Locke argued, “we must allow, that all the Art of Rhetorick, 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 cheat.”⁶⁹ It is a very eloquent denunciation of eloquence, suggesting a certain self-implicatory potential to Locke’s anti-rhetorical position. More significant, however, is the fact that rhetorical schemes and tropes also reappear, central although unrecognized, in Locke’s account of knowledge. For even as Locke condemned rhetoric, he also rehabilitated it within a natural psychology in which knowledge was constituted quasi-discursively by relationships between ideas. Knowledge for Locke was “the perception of the connexion and agreement or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas.”⁷⁰ The epistemology of enlightenment then involved investigating

cognitive operations that could be understood, finally, as instances of “persuasion.”⁷¹

Although disqualified as a mode of action between people, rhetoric was recovered as an action or process taking place within the mind.

But it was Kant’s 1791 *Critique of Judgement* that for Nietzsche provided the strongest statement of modernity’s break with rhetoric. This was because Kant raised the rejection of rhetoric to the level of a philosophical absolute in ways that precluded any possibility of its pragmatic recuperation. Consider, by way of contrast, the Corax and Tisias paradox, or the line of argument prosecuted by Plato in the *Gorgias*. In these accounts, because it could speak with equal facility on opposing sides, rhetoric was understood as effectively indifferent as to where the truth actually lay; it could be used to exonerate the guilty and convict the innocent as readily as vice versa. Such criticisms had traditionally been countered within the classical *ars rhetorica* by stressing the sense in which training in rhetoric was necessarily also a training in public virtue, for it was oriented toward the speaker’s self-presentation as a virtuous citizen in the contested space of collective deliberation. This counter-argument was reworked for Christian purposes by Augustine and Erasmus, as discussed above—and later for other purposes too, as when Thomas Sprat employed it in defending the new scientific style of the Royal Society in 1667. From Augustine to Sprat, the argument had been made that if rhetoric could be used to make falsity persuasive, this was all the more reason for it to be taken up by the partisans of truth. But for Kant, even in those instances where rhetoric was used to urge people to do what is right, or to convince them of what is true, it was necessarily self-defeating, destroying whatever good or truth it was being employed to vindicate. For him, the problem was not just that rhetoric could make untruth seem as persuasive as truth. Rather, it was that in making truth persuasive rhetoric hollowed it out, performatively falsifying otherwise true statements.

Underlying Kant's wholesale rejection of rhetoric were a new logic of appearance and a related redistribution of the lines of opposition and affiliation that ran between rhetoric and its others, most notably poetry and philosophy. The rhetor was for Plato a figure of the anti-philosopher. While philosophers sought to achieve the identity of speech and being that was ideally articulated in *logos*, rhetors exploited their non-identity. In this, rhetors resembled poets, who also spoke compellingly of things they did not truly understand, and so similarly operated in the gap between linguistic appearance and true knowledge. Kant redrew the main axis of opposition in this division of discursive labor, so that, rather than running between philosophy on the one hand and rhetoric and poetry on the other, the rhetorician was instead now revealed to be the anti-poet, while poetry, meanwhile, entered into a new alliance with philosophy. Indeed, poetry was promoted to the position of philosophy's indispensable modern supplement, in that the poet was understood as saying what the philosopher could not—saying things that were all the more philosophically relevant for their incapacity to be uttered from within philosophy's strict conceptual limits. But the poet could say these non-philosophical and yet philosophically vital things only so long as poetic language was rigorously demarcated from rhetoric.

This sharp demarcation was especially critical for Kant because rhetoric and poetry can seem so similar (as indeed they were for Plato), in that both are arts of speech that treat language aesthetically. Both involve "putting thoughts together in a presentation" using what Kant names "a manner (*modus aestheticus*)," in opposition to "a method (*modus logicus*)."⁷² Both poetry and rhetoric then arrange the conceptual content of an utterance in imaginative, affectively pleasing ways, transposing that content into the medium of beautiful appearance or semblance. But whereas poetry presents aesthetic appearance for its own sake, in a spirit of mere play, rhetoric makes appearance subservient to achieving some particular goal or end: namely, that of talking the listener around to a certain point of view or course of action. It

uses appearance as “an instrument of deception,” converting it into an attractive surface that conceals ulterior motives.⁷³ Again, the real problem here is not that rhetoric might instrumentalize discursive appearances in the service of reprehensible aims as well as virtuous ones. Rather, it lies with this instrumentalization as such, which contravenes the aesthetic autonomy that in the *Critique of Judgement* links the free play of aesthetic appearances to the free coordination taking place between an individual’s faculties of cognition, and to the ultimate horizon of free universal assent between individuals. By instrumentalizing aesthetic appearance, rhetoric systematically negates these cognitive and social freedoms. This, for Kant, is why even when rhetoric is used to promote objectively lawful ends, it invalidates those ends by denying the freedom of the subjects it addresses, aiming instead “to move people, like machines, to a judgment.”⁷⁴

And yet—and in line with Nietzsche’s thesis of the dialectical end of rhetoric—there is a rehabilitation of rhetoric in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* as total as his rejection of it. Rhetoric, understood as the art of persuasion, may be condemned, but only for it to be reinstalled at a much more generalized level as a fundamental cognitive procedure that is always active in one’s perceptual navigation of the world. At the end of the *Critique of Judgement* Kant names the operation of making something present to the mind—whether this thing be an abstract idea, like tyranny, or an existing object, like the table before one—“hypotyposis.”⁷⁵ Hypotyposis is a term of rhetorical art that refers to the description of a scene so vivid that the listener or reader as it were sees what is being described. It names, that is, the supreme fiction achieved by the rhetorician who succeeds in bringing an idea to mind with such force that it is as if the thing were literally there before one’s eyes: fictionality given the force of actuality. In repurposing this figure to name what takes place in the perceptual cognition of the world, Kant in effect locates even in actuality the operation of a constitutive fictionality, a rhetorical figuration that underlies all experience. Here, then, one

moves from rhetoric considered as a rule-governed set of procedures for the production and interpretation of speech-acts to what John Bender and David Wellbery have called “rhetoricity”: “no longer the title of a doctrine and a practice, nor a form of cultural memory, it becomes instead something like the condition of our existence.”⁷⁶ Rhetoric ends, in other words, by becoming transcendental. It is this transcendental reinscription that would later allow Martin Heidegger, in his 1927 *Being and Time*, to describe Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as “the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of being-with-one-another”—a description that would certainly have been unrecognizable to Aristotle.⁷⁷ It likewise licenses Jacques Lacan’s description of the universe as “a flower of rhetoric.”⁷⁸ And it was first announced by Nietzsche, over beers in 1872, to the only two students who showed up.

Minneapolis, 1968

In 1968, at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Minneapolis, the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) held its first “official” meeting. The idea for a society had grown out of earlier informal conversations between Edward Corbett, Richard Young, and Ross Winterowd on the place of rhetoric in the postwar university. In the 1960s, rhetoric’s usual disciplinary home was either in a department of English or a department of speech. Within English, it was most closely associated with the teaching of freshman composition courses. At the same time, there were a number of rhetoricians working in a number of emerging and quickly transforming other disciplines, from education to communication, sociology, computer science, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics. Where exactly did rhetoric fit within this institutional organization of scholarly inquiry? The question had arisen in earlier CCCC meetings, but, in Minneapolis, in what its first newsletters would try to downplay as a “working group,”

Young, Winterowd, and Corbett were joined by Janice Lauer, George Yoos, and Richard Larson among others to form the first board of directors of the RSA and to outline plans for a constitution. The RSA was to be an institutional mechanism for arriving at an answer to an institutional problem.⁷⁹

The constitution of this society was not an intellectual event on the order of *De doctrina* or *De copia*, nor was it indicative of the global situation of 20th-century rhetoric beyond the postwar American university. Nonetheless, in the early days of the society, there are several tendencies of larger contemporary configurations of rhetoric that become visible, if only in retrospect, and, in the tangle of these tendencies, one can catch a glimpse of further transformations of the idea and structure of rhetoric and a new articulation of the knot tying rhetoric to literature.

Membership grew rapidly following the foundation of the RSA. Within the first year, it had expanded from four to 180 members. An early newsletter reports that 45 percent of these members came from English, another 45 percent from speech, and 10 percent were classified as “other.”⁸⁰ It was this category of “other”—sociologists, computer scientists, psychologists, linguists—that was clearly identified as the desired source of new members. In 1969 the society invited Ellis Page, described as a “computational humanist,” and Dell Hymes, an anthropological linguist, to join the board to ensure representation from these disciplines.⁸¹ Early numbers of the newsletter note with excitement the successive emergence of rhetoric programs across North America: first the transformation of Berkley’s speech department into a department of rhetoric in 1969, then the formation of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in rhetoric at the University of Southern California, the University of Massachusetts, and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. But the RSA itself, like the field of rhetoric it sought to speak for, remained distributed across widely disparate departments and disciplines.⁸² This profusion of disciplines, which could be seen as a general tendency in the

postwar organization of knowledge production, shaped the field of rhetoric in at least four different ways.

First, in its implicit alignment with disciplines constituting and reconstituting themselves in the image of the empirical sciences, it anticipates one of the most distinctive features of 21st-century rhetoric: the proliferation of empirical studies of effective teaching, which amount to a science of writing pedagogy. This tendency was not yet pronounced in the early activities of the society, but it is now surely one of the decisive contemporary contributions of American rhetoricians to the history of rhetoric. Second, the dispersed disciplinary configurations of rhetoric fragmented the classical canons across different university departments. Speech emphasized the arts of delivery: *memoria* and *pronuntiatio*. Freshman composition classes emphasized *inventio* and, as the name indicated, *compositio*. Linguistics constituted a new science of grammar. Every major rhetorician has operated a redistribution of the canons, but here the differential field of the American university played an unexpected role, if only at the level of a structural cause. Third, the function of rhetoric was subtly shifted. The purpose of the society was, as its first newsletter announced, the study of language as language: “The Rhetoric Society of America consists of scholars from many different disciplines and sub-disciplines, all of whom are interested in the uses of language, and in the nature of language in use.”⁸³ Such formulations point to the absence of a positive or determining concept of language capable of holding together the divergent analytic perspectives presented by postwar “rhetorical” disciplines. The newsletter’s chiasmus, which attempts to paper over the issue through inclusion, actually betrays it quite precisely. The second term of the chiasmus, “language in use,” is no doubt intended to indicate the traditional field of rhetoric—language in its effectivity. But the two terms of the chiasmus also correspond to the much more modern distinction between semantics and pragmatics. And the disciplinary gulf between these modern sub-disciplines cannot be held together—let

alone integrated with ancient rhetoric—by the force of a verbal chiasmus: that is to say, merely rhetorically.

Few rhetoricians of the 20th century participated widely enough in these divergent tendencies to propose credible ways of reconciling their increasingly specialized conceptions of language. One who did attempt this task was Kenneth Burke—a participant in the early meetings of the CCCC, a teacher who promoted powerful positions in debates about the transformation of the curriculum, someone in dialogue both with the founding figures of the RSA and with the “computational humanist” Dell Hymes.⁸⁴ And as well as being an influential literary critic, Burke was himself an influential literary writer, publishing his work alongside Gertrude Stein and Jean Toomer in the *Little Review*.

If Burke was able to unite all of these discursive practices it was arguably because he had already elevated practice itself to a theory. In his synthetic *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), he expanded the terms of the practical syllogism into five distinct and complex moments: scene, agent, agency, purpose, and act. At one level, these elements map onto the traditional categories of action: the end (or “purpose”), the means (“agency”), the act and the agent, and the conditions or situation of the act (“scene”). But, in his account of each element in part 2 of the work, he deepened their sense and extended their reach so as to absorb the entire history of Western philosophy. His account of the “scene” of action, for example, is developed through a synthetic integration of different moments in the history of Western materialism from antiquity through Hobbes and Spinoza to Marx, Darwin, and Santayana. Through such means, Burke extended his originally rhetorical terms of analysis to cover all the aspects of human behavior studied variously in literary history, sociology, political philosophy, economics, mysticism, linguistics, and more. Rhetoric in this account was coextensive with the human considered in all its expansiveness.⁸⁵ Burke, however, was writing a generation earlier than the founding members of the RSA, when the disciplinary

pressures they were responding to were much less pronounced. Indeed, at the very moment Burke was writing, a further constitutive tension of recent rhetorical thought was quickly taking shape that would define the field up to the early 21st century.

This is the fourth tendency visible in the newsletter: its defection—however mild—from the main lines of the organization out of which it emerged, the CCCC. For Young, Winterowd, and Corbett, the teaching of and discourse around freshman composition had left rhetoric behind. “We used to set time aside at the CCCC and NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] conventions,” Young recalls, “to talk about what we were working on.” Richard Ohmann presented work on transformational grammar, James Kinneavy on *kairos*, Corbett on classical invention. But they felt these questions of grammar and rhetoric were being sidelined within composition.⁸⁶ Indeed, Young, Winterowd, and Corbett were the authors of influential textbooks that sought to put the teaching of freshman composition back on firm rhetorical foundations. Young’s *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* from 1970, Winterowd’s *Rhetoric and Writing* of 1965, and Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* of 1965 all tried to emphasize the centrality of the rhetorical tradition to the teaching of writing in the modern classroom. But these textbooks were ultimately unable to resolve the uneasy relationship between remedial freshman composition and English—the study of literature—that was acquiring ramified institutional dimensions.

The RSA defected from the CCCC in 1968. The CCCC had itself defected from the NCTE several years earlier, and for similar reasons. In 1948, the early members of the CCCC felt that the NCTE—and the “senior professor of literature” in particular—did not take freshman composition sufficiently seriously. The recurrent and strongly felt antagonism between the teaching of composition and the teaching of literature can be traced back to training programs in basic communication that were instituted by the US Armed Forces in the mid-1940s: the Army’s Specialist Training Personnel program and the Navy’s V-12 College

training. By 1948, over two hundred US universities had established courses to meet these demands. The courses were often housed in English departments, where faculty were “available because of diminished wartime enrollments.”⁸⁷ Teachers of English literature, however, were not trained in the teaching of basic communication for military bureaucratic purposes—nor were they particularly interested in it. And the Army was not particularly interested in English literature. As Roxanne Mountford explains, “the Army refused to allow an infusion of literature into the course, believing it to be useless for the kind of training they wanted.”⁸⁸ A structuring tension emerged in English departments between the usually junior staff teaching composition courses and the senior staff teaching literary history and criticism. It was “against literature,” David Bartholomae writes in an overview of the early days of the CCCC, that “freshman English asserted itself as composition.”⁸⁹

The RSA was then a defection within a defection, the negation of a negation. But this second negation did not retie the knot that might have reconnected rhetoric with literature. Wayne Booth was one of the first members of the board of directors; his 1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was already one of the most important texts in postwar literary theory. But rhetorical criticism like that of Booth was no more than a marginal element in the early days of the RSA. This was implicit in the composition of the board, on which Booth was almost the sole representative of literature. It was rendered explicit in a note intended to allay readers’ concerns that the next RSA meeting might be held at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention: “any meeting of the Rhetoric Society held at an exclusively English meeting would . . . be improper, since approximately 55 percent of our membership lies outside of the area of English.”⁹⁰

The forms in which this persistent tension were expressed would vary over the second half of the 20th century. It sometimes took the form of a polite if indecisive acknowledgment of different interests—the engagement of the reader versus the control of interpretation, for

instance.⁹¹ Sometimes it took the form of sophisticated attempts to retie the knot.⁹² But perhaps the most bracing positions pushed the relation to a position of principled antagonism. Composition in such accounts is the site of engaged, activist, immediate, and concrete work; where students can reflect their own experience and find their experiences reflected; where marginal groups write back, and where difference is affirmed rather than covered over. Literary historians in this view remain ensconced in abstractions and antiquated ideologies that tacitly (and not always so tacitly) reproduce the ruling social faultlines of class and race. The debate is still being played out in the RSA and its journal *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. From 1968, rhetoric—for so long an elite reserve: aristocratic, male, European—becomes an institutional location in which those traditional educational prerogatives are placed under acute critical pressure, and where they go by the name “literature.” An irony of history, perhaps. But if so, it is also an irony that is entirely rhetorical—whether assessed in terms of rhetoric’s now three-thousand-year-long history of differential entwinements with literature, or those of the shifting fields of social and disciplinary determination in the postwar American university.

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Notes

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⁵ Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 52.

⁶ Barbara Cassin, “Esquisse de typologie des définitions de la rhétorique de Platon à *Ælius Aristide*,” in *La Rhétorique au miroir de la philosophie*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Paris: Vrin, 2015), 25.

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⁸ Plato, “Gorgias,” 502d.

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¹⁰ Plato, “Gorgias,” 465e.

¹¹ Aristotle, “Topics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 1*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 100a20–100b20. See Aristotle, “Rhetoric,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1355a. <AU: As full citation details are required also for “Rhetoric,” please check this edit

retains the intended meaning or revise as required.>

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¹⁴ Aristotle, “Rhetoric,” 1404a.

¹⁵ Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, 281, 282.

¹⁶ Aristotle, “Rhetoric,” 1404a.

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²⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1458a.

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- ²³ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 59.
- ²⁴ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.4.7.
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- ²⁹ Augustine, *De doctrina*, preface, 12.
- ³⁰ Augustine, *De doctrina*, 1.13.
- ³¹ Augustine, *De doctrina*, 1.1.
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- ³³ Copeland and Sluiter, "General Introduction," 48.
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- ⁴⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.15.3, p. 315.
- ⁴⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.20.9, p. 335.
- ⁴⁶ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.15.3, p. 315.
- ⁴⁷ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.15.3, p. 315.
- ⁴⁸ Erasmus, “De copia,” in *Collected Works of Erasmus Vol. 24*, ed. Craig R. Thompson, <AU: Please add the editor’s name, if available> trans. Betty Knott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 284.
- ⁴⁹ Erasmus, “De copia,” 285, 285, 288.
- ⁵⁰ Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 19.
- ⁵¹ Erasmus, “De copia,” 295.
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- ⁵⁵ Erasmus, “De copia,” 295.
- ⁵⁶ Cave, *Cornucopian Text*, 6.
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- ⁶¹ Nietzsche, *Rhetoric*, 3.
- ⁶² Nietzsche, *Rhetoric*, 21.
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- ⁸⁰ **<AU: Please add the editors' full names: No editors named and article title>** "Board Report," *Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (July 1969): 3.
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