THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

Readings from Classical Times to the Present
GENERAL
INTRODUCTION

In parturition begins the centrality of the nervous system. The different nervous systems, through language and the ways of production, aren't various communities of interests and insights, social communities varying in nature and scope. And out of the division and the community arises the "universal" rhetorical situation. — KENNETH BURKE

Rhetoric has a number of overlapping meanings: the practice of oratory; the study of the strategies of effective oratory; the use of language, written or spoken, to inform or persuade; the study of the persuasive effects of language; the study of the relation between language and knowledge; the classification and use of tropes and figures; and, of course, the use of empty promises and half-truths as a form of propaganda. Nor does this list exhaust the definitions that might be given. Rhetoric is a complex discipline with a long history. It is less helpful to try to define it once and for all than to look at the many definitions it has accumulated over the years and to attempt to understand how each arose and how each still inhabits and shapes the field.

This general introduction offers an overview of the historical development of rhetoric divided into conventional chronological periods: the Classical (from the birth of rhetoric in ancient Greece to about 400 B.C.E.), the Medieval (to about 1400), the Renaissance (to about 1700), the Enlightenment (from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth century), the Nineteenth Century, and the Modern and Post-modern (the twentieth century). The introductions to each of the six parts of The Rhetorical Tradition provide a more detailed historical and theoretical picture of the development of rhetoric.

THE ORIGINS OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric in its various incarnations has been a powerful force in public affairs and in education; for most of its existence since the fifth century B.C.E., when it developed in Greece, rhetoric courts and flourished under Greek democracy. Rhetoric was, first and
Types of Rhetorical Discourse

The classical system of rhetoric defines three principal kinds of public speech: the legal or forensic speech, which takes place in the courtroom and concerns judgment about past actions; the political or deliberative speech in the legislative assembly, concerned with moving people to future action; and the ceremonial or epideictic speech in a public forum, intended to strengthen shared beliefs about the present state of affairs. In the classical system, these three situations constitute the entire domain of rhetoric. Later rhetoricians expanded this list to include sermons, letters, and eventually all forms of discourse, even conversation, that could be seen as persuasive in intent.

Psychology and Audience Analysis

The rhetorical occasion always includes an audience, and the speaker must consider the motives that are likely to influence audiences of the three types of speech. Classical rhetoric accordingly examines the psychology and moral assumptions of the different kinds of people who may comprise an audience. Aristotle assumes that people always seek to serve their own self-interest and that different people perceive their self-interest differently; he thus compares young men and old, the rich and the poor, and rulers of democracies and of oligarchies. He treats most psychological attributes as human nature, common to all people in all circumstances (all young men have hot tempers and strong appetites, for example). Even for those attributes that are conditioned by social class, political interest, and history, he seeks the most general explanation. Audience analysis helps chiefly to determine the kinds of emotional appeals that might be used, for logical appeals (as we shall see) are not supposed to be subject to such vagaries.

Preparation of a Speech

Classical rhetoric divides the process of preparing a persuasive speech into five stages:

1. Invention: the search for persuasive ways to present information and formulate arguments
2. Arrangement, the organization of the parts of a speech to ensure that all the means of persuasion are present and properly disposed
3. Style, the use of correct, appropriate, and striking language throughout the speech
4. Memory, the use of mnemonics and practice of the speech
5. Delivery, the use of effective gestures and vocal modulation to present the speech

This five-part composing process remains a cornerstone of the study of rhetoric. The speaker is supposed to produce a discourse by proceeding stepwise through these stages. Although the speaker's specific choices in each stage of the process
depend on the occasion for his (or, rarely, her) speech, the five-part process is taken to be appropriate for composing any kind of speech. All of the parts are necessary to ensure production of a full range of appeals. The classical system assumes that there are three forms of persuasive appeal: reason (logos), to emotion (pathos), and to the speaker's authority (ethos). We shall see how these forms are included in a speech as we examine each stage of the process.

Invention. In the classical system, the first stage of composing, invention, is the most important, because here rational arguments—appeals to logos—are devised. Logical appeals are regarded as superior to the other two. Aristotle assumes that rationality is the most uniform and universal of the human mental abilities, or faculties, and so logical arguments will presumably have the widest currency. At the same time, he argues that emotional appeals are needed in the effective speech, though he and his successors lament the fact that rational appeals alone are not enough. Classical rhetoric emphasizes logos as if in recognition that human beings respond most strongly to rational appeals, though this idea may be more a hope than a fact, an attempt to increase the power of rational appeals by valorizing them. Classical rhetoric offers several methods of generating rational appeals. One is to consider the common topics, or-topoi ( commonplace or vex in Latin), to see whether arguments can be developed in terms of any of them. The topics are stuck in arguments may be cast. They include comparison seemingly non-rational appeals as parts of proper names. In addition to the universally applicable topics are special topics for particular kinds of speech or subject matter—the rules of evidence in criminal law, for example. When employing any of these heuristic devices, the rhetorician "innovate" arguments in the sense of finding ways to combine and present evidence persuasively.

Rational appeals in classical invention are not designed to be equivalent to scientific demonstration. Aristotle draws important distinctions among demonstration, dialectic, and rhetoric and the type of knowledge found in each demonstration. Aristotle uses rigorous syllogistic logic to approach probable truths in questions about human affairs and philosophy that do not lend themselves to absolute certainty. Rhetoric also seeks probable truth in the realm of human affairs, relying on knowledge produced by demonstration and dialectic, along with traditional or received wisdom and the various means of finding persuasive connections, such as those suggested by the common topics.

Another form of rational appeal is the enthymeme, which, like the syllogism used in dialectic, deduces a conclusion from a general premise. But whereas the general premise of a syllogism is supposed to be true and its deduction therefore necessary, the general premise of an enthymeme is merely probable, leading to a tentative conclusion. Often this premise is not stated explicitly but is assumed to be part of the audience's common knowledge.

The rhetorician constructing an argument must draw on sources of knowledge that lie outside the domains of rhetoric. To ensure access to these sources, the rhetorician must be learned in philosophy, history, law, literature, and other fields of study. A point heavily stressed by Cicero and Quintilian. Given the scope of rhetoric, however, the distinctions between inside and outside can blur, making unclear the nature of the rhetorician's activities with respect to knowledge. This problem is a continuing theme of rhetorical theory. In the classical view, rhetoric magnifies knowledge, conveying but not creating it; the rhetorician's activities are subordinate to the truth-seeking of the scientist and the philosopher. But people have not always agreed that philosophy or science has access to true knowledge. If, as some philosophers maintain, all knowledge is uncertain and constructed by argument, then rhetoric has all the more value because it studies the ways in which argument and persuasion create conviction, and because it creates the provisional agreements and shared values on which human community depends.

In Aristotle's day, the position that all knowledge is contingent was defended mostly and clearly by the Sophists, who saw themselves as both philosophers and rhetoricians. In modern parlance, the Sophists treat rhetoric as epistemic, as making no knowledge. Moreover, they tend to see all language use as rhetorical—that is, persuasive in intent. Through language, people collectively construct a value-laden worldview (the only kind of worldview available) and reach agreement on how to act together for their mutual benefit in light of that worldview. Different communities may see things differently because of their cultural traditions and historical circumstances. For the Sophists, there are no privileged nonrhetorical discourses and no privileged nonrhetorical knowledge.

The Sophists' position was attacked and discredited by Aristotle's teacher Plato. In traditional histories of rhetoric, the Sophists are often slighted, but their epistemic vision of rhetoric haunts the subject to the present day. Even Plato, who condemned the Sophists, came to see rhetoric as an essential component in the search for true knowledge. And in other eras the Sophistic view of rhetoric has reassessed itself. Today, philosophical skepticism about true or foundational knowledge has sparked renewed interest in Sophism.

Arrangement. In the stage of arrangement, the arguments devised through invention are placed in the most effective order. Aristotle says that all speeches have four parts: the introduction, the statement of the case, the argument, and the conclusion. Logical appeals should go into the statement and argument, while appeals to reason and ethos should appear in the introduction and conclusion. Cicero spells out a five-part structure with a more precise distribution of appeals: The introduction should contain ethical and pathetic appeals; the narration of the facts of the case, while ostensibly logical, should also be an occasion for pathetic appeals; the statement of position should hold the logical arguments in favor of the position; the refutation should make logical arguments against the opponent's position; and the conclusion should embody further pathetic and ethical appeals.

Emotional appeals are something of an embarrassment in the classical system. They are generated by a kind of invention process that examines the nature of emotions, the kinds of stimuli that may excite them, and the motives and inclinations of the different types of people to whom the emotional appeals might be directed. In the classical system, this process of formulating emotional appeals is distinguished...
from logical invention, and it shifts by default from the invention stage to the arrangement stage. In the arrangement stage, the speaker considers the kind of discourse, the nature of the subject, and the characteristics of the audience to be presented. The nature of the subject, the characteristics of the audience, and the arrangement of the discourse can all be thought of as a form of nonlogical, logical, and emotional appeal. Arrangement is itself thus a form of nonlogical, logical, and emotional appeal. Arrangement is itself thus a form of nonlogical, logical, and emotional appeal. Arrangement is itself thus a form of nonlogical, logical, and emotional appeal. Arrangement is itself thus a form of nonlogical, logical, and emotional appeal. Arrangement is itself thus a form of nonlogical, logical, and emotional appeal.

Style. Style is separate from invention and arrangement in the classical five-part scheme. It involves the process of forming ideas in the attractive verbal form. Aristotle defines style as the art of decoration, a work to base the human desire for beauty and ingenuity, and for the creation of beautiful and original works.

Stylistic rhetoric does not typically address the question of generating ideas, which is the province of invention. But for some rhetoricians, the search for effective figures is akin to invention. The rhetorical figures, like the topics of invention, are often seen as parallel to human thought processes. Hence, formulating ideas in figures and arranging arguments will make them more understandable, memorable, and convincing. At the same time, the process of stylistic formulation can be seen as a heuristic method, in which ideas are discovered by the search for figurative expression. Metaphor in particular has been regarded as a heuristic method, in which ideas are discovered by the search for figurative expression.

Memory. Classical rhetoric adopted the notion that memory could be improved by training it as a system of visualized locations, somewhat similar to the way the commonplaces are imagined to reside in actual mental locations that one can derive from.

Delphi. For Aristotle, delivery is an art of speaking, which he describes. Like memory, delivery has often received rather perfunctory treatment, even by Quintilian and others who take a brighter view than Aristotle and acknowledge its importance. The Roman rhetoricians understand that voice, gestures, and facial expressions materially affect the impact of all that has gone into a speech. Delivery is a system of nonverbal signs that has enormous power, a power recognized by eighth-century elocutionists and by twentieth-century electronic media analysts, among others.

The Influence of Classical Rhetoric

Rhetoric has frequently been treated as if it were chiefly a succession of reforms of the classical system outlined above. There is some justice in this view. The fundamental concepts of rhetoric in all ages appear to be those defined in the classical period: purpose, audience, composition, argumentation, organization, and style. Not only do the classical categories of rhetorical study persist, but so do many of the particular. In every period we find discussions of the common and special topics, the steps in composing, the figures of speech, and so on. And with respect to larger questions of theory, the status of knowledge as true or contingent continues, even today to be unsettled. Yet for all the continuing of the rhetorical tradition, rhetoric has grown and changed. Classical rhetoric may name many of the fundamental concerns, but it does not exhaust the possibilities for understanding the nature of persuasive discourse, as a review of the history of rhetoric will suggest.

Late Classical Rhetoric in Rome

Roman rhetoricians (such as Cicero and Quintilian) drew largely on the Greeks (chiefly Gorgias, Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle). Much of the work by the Roman writers is prescriptive, providing guidelines for employing the techniques arrayed in the five-part composing process. But Cicero and others also went beyond considerations of structure to speculate about the ways in which persuasion shaped belief and
action. Oratory in Cicero’s time (the first century B.C.) was a powerful political weapon—one Cicero himself wielded—and rhetoric, however derivative its theory, was an art that helped organize civilized communal life. By the time of Quintilian (the first century B.C.), Rome was an empire and political oratory was suppressed. Rhetoric was still used in the law courts, but it also became a form of entertainment, focused on didactic extravagance. Yet Quintilian envisioned the creation, through rhetorical training that includes broadly humane learning, of a “good man speaking well” who might save the state.

MEDEVAL RHETORIC

Early Christianity

Quintilian’s good speaker were to be found in early medieval times, perhaps he would be a member of the new faith, Christianity. But many of the Church fathers doubted that pagan rhetoric could serve the needs of the new religion. They saw rhetoric as part of the hated Greco-Roman culture, imbued with the hopeless moral corruption of the pagan world. Moreover, rhetorical invention generates probable knowledge through the commonplace and the enthymeme, but Christian knowledge comes from revelation. Augustin, at the turn of the fifth century, makes it at least a practical decision in favor of rhetoric by focusing on the issue of persuasion: Christianity cannot afford to eschew a powerful tool for defending and expounding its principles and beliefs.

The Later Middle Ages

Augustine’s accommodation of rhetoric and Christianity did not result in much new work on rhetoric in the Middle Ages, however. Not long after Augustine’s death, Boethius, one of the last scholars with classical training in Greek and Latin, wrote a brief summary of classical rhetoric. His summary, more widely available than the original, reduced thousands of pages of theory and practical advice to a few lines, and each of the most general points. This kind of work is typical of the treatment of rhetoric—and most other branches of learning—for almost eight hundred years after the times of Augustine and Boethius. Classical texts were rare, and the Church, while preserving them, also wished to preserve their rarity.

Rhetoric in the Middle Ages did produce sets of rules for the art of preaching and for the legal letters through which the far-flung Church and secular governments were administered. Manuals of preaching and of letter writing began to appear in great numbers after the twelfth century. Also persisting through the medieval period was the study of style, generally separated from other rhetorical concerns and associated with the composition of verse. The uses of rhetoric by both men and women and associated with the composition of verse—for example, in negotiations at a royal court—were also increasingly recognized, as in the work of Christine de Pizan.
Ramus

In the sixteenth century, the classical approach to rhetoric was assaulted by the French philosopher Peter Ramus, who proposed a popular reform of the allied arts of dialectic and rhetoric. Ramus sought to perfect the syllogism as a way of examining arguments about the world. Logically perfect statements, as long as they were not inconsistent with divine revelation, were comparatively true. Dialectic would thus grasp the truth (through the syllogism), while rhetoric would offer it to the public.

Ramus, however, formally separates invention (and arrangement as well) from rhetoric and assigns it to dialectic. Ramus believes that contiguous fields of study should not overlap, especially where one field possesses a clearly superior method—that is, as in this case, where dialectic is, he says, superior. Rhetoric in Ramus's scheme is confined to style, memory, and delivery. Ramistic rhetoric, taken up almost entirely with matters of style, flourished well into the seventeenth century, though it was vigorously opposed by Cicero, who argued for the continued importance of all five parts of the classical composing process.

Science, Epistemology, and Rhetoric

The Ramistic conception of dialectic was overturned by the inductive orientation of the new approach to science. Francis Bacon, at the turn of the seventeenth century, argues that the syllogism cannot discover anything new. The proper distinction to draw, Bacon says, is between inquiry, as the work of science, and recovery, as the work of rhetorical invention. Even though Bacon supports a rhetoric that includes all its traditional parts, one consequence of the new scientific movement of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the further estrangement of rhetoric from the source of knowledge. Some of Bacon's followers attack rhetoric as an unreliable tool for handling knowledge. And not only rhetoric but language itself comes under this attack.

But if language is unreliable, how is truth to be known? Can words and sentences, even if purged of ornament, stand for mental representations? Can language be purified for science or philosophy? Bacon addresses the problem this way: Human knowledge must be regarded as only a version of the objective truth. A version warped by prejudices, preconceptions, and imperfect language. Verbal representations of this knowledge introduce distortion because they are signs that may lose their definition, their link to the signified. Bacon hopes that careful observation and skeptical induction will overcome these epistemological limitations and reveal the truth of things, a truth that rhetoric may then disseminate. But by the very fact of elaborating the nature of mental and verbal "distortion," he reopens the possibility that the processes of thought and language are neutral conveyors of truth.

The Enlightenment

John Locke also struggled with this problem. Human language must make use of generalizations, Locke contends, or else words will proliferate along with the multitude of things in the world until language becomes too cumbersome to use conveniently with a growing number of people. Generalities don't actually exist: They are ideas, similarities perceived by human observers. But while Locke seems certain that the general idea comes first, he also suggests that it is in some sense created by language. In any case, there is no guarantee that the generality signified by a word will convey the same idea to all users of the language. This is a serious problem, and Locke and his successors blame rhetoric for making it worse. If only stylistic exaggerations were curbed, they say, language might be closer to the things it names—if not to things out in the world, then at least to people's clear and distinct ideas about them.

For a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rhetoricians, these complaints were a call for reform. Rhetoric was out of step with the times, it seemed, because invention relied on enriched deductive methods and stylistic rhetoric impeded the already difficult search for truth. Rhetoric ought to moderate its reliance on the topics for invention because those topics depend on received wisdom rather than observed fact. Furthermore, syllogistic reasoning should be limited, as in Bacon's scheme, to avoiding fallacies. And clarity (or "perspicuity") should of course be preferred to an ornamented style. These reforms proved to be widely influential and later allowed for the development of a more epistemologically sophisticated rhetoric.

The Eighteenth Century

Gianbattista Vico, an Italian professor of rhetoric of the early eighteenth century, was one of the few in his day to challenge science's claim of epistemological superiority. Responding to the philosophy of René Descartes, Vico objects that the famous philosopher's method relies, no less than rhetoric does, on probability and belief rather than demonstration of absolute truth. Vico even sees rhetoric as superior to the Cartesian method, for rhetoric takes probability seriously, understands the ways in which argument produces belief, and trains young people for responsible civic action, while Cartesianism does not. An honest analysis of the function of language, Vico argues, will reveal the ways in which knowledge is actually formed, in contrast to the Cartesianists' claims to have the real truth. Vico's ideas, however, had little influence in his own day. His elaboration of the epistemological doubts hinted at in Bacon conflicted with the positive thrust of the new theory of knowledge, a thrust that was supported by the growth of empirical scientific learning. Vico was seen as a reactionary, an opponent of scientific and philosophical progress.

But Bacon had already suggested an obvious and less contentious connection that rhetoric could make with epistemology—namely, through psychology. Rhetoric could observe the structure of the mind and thereby enhance communication. Rhetoric, after all, addresses the faculties of the mind. Should it not study the ways of making this address most efficient and effective? By taking a scientific attitude toward the study of language, rhetoric could ally itself with a power that would otherwise remain a dangerous enemy. Thus eighteenth-century rhetoricians endorse an ideal of style, support "natural" arrangement, and favor a rhetorical theory that follows "human nature" in appealing to reason and emotion. Moreover, they argued the classical authors as excellent observers of human nature. According to Locke's theory of uniform psychology, human nature presumably has not changed...
since the classical authors’ day; therefore, studying these writers’ works could not conflict with the new “scientific” standards of psychology.

Bacon identifies along with each mental faculty a genre that especially addresses it: philosophy for Reason, history for Memory, and literature for Imagination. George Campbell, writing late in the eighteenth century, extends Bacon’s taxonomy of faculties and genres. Scientific demonstration is but one form of communication, says Campbell, appealing to one faculty, Reason, through a preferred style, perspicuity or clarity. Campbell even steers close to Vico’s argument here, pointing out that demonstration relies on belief in previous demonstrations, proofs, and axioms.

Between science and rhetoric, then, Campbell sees a range of probabilistic reasoning, not a determination in kind. Rhetoric will give the best account not only of reason but also of the other faculties of the human mind. Campbell argues, for rhetoric is the psychological turn was to be the emphasis on “universal” modes of discourse, modes that address not audiences but mental faculties. Thus rhetoric moves toward a more “scientific” theory and takes a proprietorial interest in psychology.

Rhetoric and Psychology

Psychology had been a concern for rhetoric since the time of Aristotle. Indeed, Aristotle has more care for psychology than most of his rhetorical descendants do. Most rhetorical systems focus on reasoning, discourse structures, and style but have little to say about appealing to a variety of audiences, beyond the rather obvious advice to adjust style and learning to their capacities. Ironically, perhaps, the new approach to psychology in the eighteenth century does not focus attention on audiences at all. Instead, it treats all minds as essentially the same. This approach conforms to Locke’s influential idea of universal psychology: it is democratic in the sense of being uniform, hence egalitarian, and it is expedient for an expanded theory of communication. The scene of psychological rhetoric, in its textbooks and theories, is a mind, not a public forum.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY RHETORIC

So closely connected were rhetoric and psychology by the nineteenth century that the influential psychologist Alexander Bain taught rhetoric and wrote a textbook on written composition. Bain argues that figures of speech reflect the mental operations of comparison, contrast, and association and that the modes of discourse—description, narration, exposition, argument, and poetry—correspond to mental faculties. For Bain, invention and arrangement are more or less determined by the nature of the modes of discourse. That is, description presents an object whose parts must be set forth in some convenient order, narrative is the presentation of a chronological sequence of actions, and so on. For argument, invention combines knowledge of the subject and syllogistic reasoning. As for style, clarity is still the standard, except, of course, for imaginative literature.

Challenges to Rhetoric and Psychology

The comfortable notion promoted by Bain’s faculty psychology that all audiences were essentially the same was disrupted in the nineteenth century, as public speakers and their audiences became increasingly diverse. White women, who had been able to claim a public voice in the Renaissance, now mounted the speaker’s platform in increasing numbers to agitate for a variety of social reforms. In doing so, they still had to defend their right to speak, and often they did so by drawing on religious authority. Women and men of color also addressed new audiences, although, as Maria Stewart learned, African American women sometimes faced stiff resistance to their public speaking even within the black community; and as Frederick Douglass experienced, white audiences often attempted to impose racist stereotypes on African American speakers. But no longer would the typical rhetorical situation in the West be one in which speaker and audience were all the same race and sex, and rhetorical theory, though slowly, began to take this diversity into account.

Though still seeking universals, psychology changed radically at the close of the nineteenth century, largely through the work of Sigmund Freud. The patient’s speech is at the heart of psychoanalysis, but Freud and his followers were interested in what was hidden in this speech—in its source in nonverbal experiences and unconscious drives—not in its persuasive effects. Psychoanalysis pointed to mental realities apparently beyond the reach of verbal persuasion, and so rhetoric continued to rely for the structure of its appeals upon the older psychology of Bain. Yet the inadequacy of Bain’s system was demonstrated not only by changes in the science of psychology but also by changing rhetorical situations.

In the nineteenth century, too, schools and colleges added a vast number of new subjects, responding at last to the demands of science, technology, and business as well as to the pressure for mass education. Rhetoric had had the lion’s share of the curriculum, but competition from other disciplines now forced rhetoric into one- or two-semester courses. Narrowed in compass, rhetoric focused more and more on written composition. Soon written composition became an adjunct of newly formed departments of English literature, and separate departments of speech communications were taken over in instruction in oral delivery and the study of rhetoric’s history. Moreover, education beyond the elementary level became increasingly available to white women and to men and women of color, and the traditional curriculum designed for a white male elite would not meet these new students’ needs.

But if women’s, self, and society all escaped the domain of the rhetorical—at least for a time—they have returned in the modern era. In the late nineteenth century, philosopher and one-time rhetoric teacher Friedrich Nietzsche challenged the self-denial assumptions on which scientific knowledge appeared, to its defenders, to treat what we are pleased to call Truth, says Nietzsche (echoing the Sophists), is a deliberate self-construction. They construct the world they wish to
believe in, using a language that is far from objective and neutral. Language can never be so, says Nietzsche; it is always partial, value-laden, intentional—in short, rhetorical. Nietzsche’s ideas, so dissonant in his own time, have made their mark in ours.

MODERN AND POSTMODERN RHETORIC

The Twentieth Century

A number of twentieth-century rhetoricians have offered rhetorically grounded theories of meaning, value, intention, and knowledge. I. A. Richards, for example, sees in rhetoric an approach to meaning that can correct the “proper meaning fallacy”—the idea (already attacked by Nietzsche) that there is a direct link between words and the things or ideas they represent. Rhetoric shows, for Richards, that meaning is a function of context. Words are meaningful only in discourse (not, that is, in dictionaries), and discourse is meaningful to people who understand language by relating its present use to their previous experience of it. Richards thus defines rhetoric broadly, as the study of communication and understanding.

Kenneth Burke follows a similar path in his work. Discourse of all kinds, he says, seeks to motivate people in some way, so we should seek meaning in intentions and effects. Language is a form of human action; it requires an agent with a purpose, a scene of action, a rhetorical strategy, and an actual speech or text. Seeing discourse this way, “dramatically” as Burke calls it, is to see all language as motivated, hence as rhetorical. Burke searches discourse for its ideological function of promoting identification with communities and their beliefs. In his analyses, rhetoric merges with political, psychological, sociological, religious, and aesthetic investigations of human behavior.

For Chaim Perelman, rhetoric is a powerful and necessary alternative to formal logic for the study of practical reasoning. Indeed, he says, formal logic is useless outside its own tiny, abstract realm. Echoing Vice, Perelman objects to the Cartesian implication that probabilistic argument is not rational and therefore not worthy of development because it does not produce absolute truth. But probabilistic arguments are the basis of legal, ethical, and practical decisions that guide our lives. Rhetoric can tell us, says Perelman, about the way that knowledge and belief are formed by arguments based on probable reasoning, experience, and established customs. Moreover, a rhetorical view of knowledge serves as a warning against the claim, often advanced in liberal causes, that some knowledge is absolute and beyond argument. Even in science, as modern philosophers of science admit (or at least doubt), knowledge arises through argument within communities that share assumptions and beliefs.

Rhetorical theory, following these lines of development, has come to focus today on the question of the source and status of knowledge. Philosophers like Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, who do not work in the rhetorical tradition, nonetheless contribute to modern rhetorical theory through their important studies of language and its relation to knowledge. Foucault, for example, follows Nietzsche in attacking the idea that language is the passive conveyer of knowledge.

Discourse, he says, is part of the network of knowledge and power, shaped by disciplines and institutions with their complex interactions and motivations. Authority to speak about certain kinds of knowledge (ethos, we might say) comes from institutional certification; reason is a function of accepted modes of reference and discipline-specific processes of validation; and the persistence of institutions and their prerogatives depends upon power that is maintained and exercised through discourse itself. In thus regarding language as intentional, powerful, caught up in the creation of knowledge and its uses, Foucault offers a theory that is entirely in line with the modern approach to rhetoric.

Concern about the status of knowledge and its relationship to language is no means limited to the fields of rhetoric and philosophy. Scientific knowledge now appears to progress not by rational observation but by the accumulation of facts but by argument. The unconscious mind produces knowledge as a kind of persuasive discourse, from the modern point of view, making psychoanalysis a form of rhetorical criticism. Such conclusions are echoed in virtually every field of knowledge: Our learning comes from interpretation, our disciplines grow by argument, our communities cohere through discourse, our ideologies are structured of persuasion. Reality itself is a function of the ways we use language.

The epistemic questions raised by the human sciences and even the natural sciences address the need to study speech acts and speech genres, discursive formations and discourse communities, the dramatic scenes of communication, the linguistic construction of consciousness, and the rhetorical construction of knowledge. And indeed, this is the program put forward by the rhetoricians of our age. For rhetorical theory now, language is always persuasive in intent, always imbued with ethics and ideology. Language, as Richard Weaver puts it, is sermonic. It is not first a mental system but a social one, founded on dialogue, not linguistics. Rhetoric is synonymous with meaning, for meaning is in use and context, not in words themselves.

Knowledge and belief are products of persuasion, which seeks to make the arguable seem natural, to turn positions into premises—and it is rhetoric’s responsibility to reveal these ideological operations. Such are the new concerns of rhetoric.

New Rhetorics

In examining its own ideological operations, rhetoric is looking critically at its own canon and its own exclusions. As white women and men of color have increasingly participated in public forums, they have begun to theorize the differences race and gender make in language use. This work parallels other contemporary theory that investigates the epistemic nature of rhetoric, since women’s rhetorics and rhetorics of color typically find that language use is constitutive of gender and racial identities. Virginia Woolf was one of the first to forcefully address the social and economic barriers to women’s use of the full range of the powers of language. She argued that, because of these barriers, what women can really do with language is not yet known—a sister to Shakespeare, she notes, has not yet been published—but she suggests in the form of her own essays what distinctively feminine writing might be like. Later twentieth-century writers, following Woolf’s

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lead, have explicitly searched for language and rhetoric specific to women. Hélène Cixous describes an *écriture féminine* that draws its sensuous expressive fluidity, she argues, from the nature of female sexuality. At the same time, characteristics specific to African American language and rhetoric have begun to be studied. Among theorists of rhetorics of color, Gloria Anzaldúa presents the most searching challenge, perhaps, to classical rhetorical models, in that she envisions, and enacts, communication across linguistic as well as cultural and ideological borders. For her, the full use of all her linguistic resources is crucial both to her sense of self and to her ability to communicate a complex cultural viewpoint to diverse audiences.

The epistemological and ideological orientation of rhetoric is not an entirely new development. Rhetoric has always been concerned with political action and the search for knowledge. The history of rhetoric is the story of a long struggle to understand the relationship between discourse and knowledge, communication and its effects, language and experience. Thus the latest theories of rhetoric recover its earliest and most abiding concerns and build on a long tradition that is now, more than ever, worthy of our close attention.

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**Part One**

**CLASSICAL RHETORIC**