

*Introduction: Rhetoric as the  
Liberal Art of Soul-Leading in Writing*

[1.1] “Rhetoric” is a term of abuse, of course: Immediately after someone has distorted the truth during an interview on television, for example, the journalist will comment, “We know that was just rhetoric.” Rhetoric: this pejorative term now means any language, spoken or written, which is misleading or actually untrue. There is reality, and there is rhetoric. As a consequence of such usage, my readers may be surprised to learn that they will be studying this suspect art in order to learn how to write the academic essay. In fact, the art of rhetoric has always been suspect in the Western philosophical tradition, an outlaw of disciplines only occasionally allowed respectability; even so, many of the most important figures in the Western intellectual tradition were indeed trained in this art. In literature, the epic poets Virgil, Ovid, Dante, and Milton were themselves educated in rhetoric, and Homer arguably invented it. Shakespeare’s schooling was thor-

## THE OFFICE OF ASSERTION

oughly rhetorical. In philosophy, rhetoric's most thoughtful critics, Plato and Augustine, were both trained in rhetoric, and Augustine was himself a teacher of the art, even after his conversion to Christianity. Nietzsche was a professor of rhetoric. Even the "anti-philosopher" Jacques Derrida hoped to revive the art of rhetoric, though in its sophistic form. In politics, the founders of the American regime were rhetoricians, in part because they were lawyers, but more importantly because they were liberally educated, and, until very recently, a liberal education in the humanities was a rhetorical education. Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, Cady-Stanton, King: these American leaders were all students of the art of rhetoric. Arousing both fear and interest, rhetoric has always been suspect, but it has still, interestingly, always been studied.

[1.2] The fear is mistaken, but the interest is not. This small book has two rather large rhetorical purposes of its own. On the one hand, it has a highly practical goal: improving the reader's writing, especially of the academic essay. It will examine rhetoric as a productive art, the principled process of making a product, in this case an essay. On the other hand, it also has a more general goal: persuading the reader that rhetoric, as both a productive and a liberal art, is a good thing. To argue that rhetoric is a liberal art is hardly common. Intellectuals in both the humanities and the sciences generally believe that rhetoric

is a corrupt form of inquiry—those in the humanities convinced either that its calculation precludes sincerity or that its informal reasoning precludes seriousness, those in the sciences convinced that its interest in the emotions precludes objectivity. As well, some in the humanities actually concede that rhetoric is not interested in truth, yet then defend it on those grounds; for them, rhetoric is composed of the rules of any discourse, and an interest in the truth or falsity of any word is naïve. Though they may or may not realize it, they are defending, not rhetoric, but sophistry. (We will return to this in a moment.) I grant that rhetoric is often misused, and I grant that it has its own limitations as an art. Many good things are limited, though, and there is nothing that cannot be abused. The misuse of rhetoric, according to Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, does not condemn it:

If it is argued that one who makes an unfair use of such a faculty of speech may do a great deal of harm, this objection applies equally to all good things except virtue, and above all to those things which are most useful, such as health, wealth, generalship; for as these, rightly used, may be of the greatest benefit, so, wrongly used, they may do an equal amount of harm. (I.I.I3)

Rhetoric is no more essentially destructive than physics. There is no need to fear this art. As the reader's writing improves, he or she should expe-



## THE OFFICE OF ASSERTION

rience an increasing intellectual power. This power is a good power, even if the student were to misuse it. When a journalist exposes misleading or untrue statements, for example, that is a good thing. What the journalist simply may not recognize, or will not admit to the audience, is that the exposure is just as rhetorical as the statement exposed. The art of rhetoric is not unjust; those who use it unjustly are. As Aristotle explains, "What makes one a sophist is not the faculty but the moral purpose" (I.I.I4). Aristotle believes that rhetoric and sophistry are distinct: rhetoric is persuasion aimed at the truth; sophistry is persuasion aimed only at the appearance of truth. This book, then, offers a defense of rhetoric. The most important of its proofs is that rhetoric is a liberal art which liberates one both to defend oneself against untrue persuasions and to fashion true ones. Often, those untrue persuasions are one's own; after all, we are all familiar with the sophist within, that part of us who arises, especially in haste or anger, to utter sham arguments, arguments that—in calmer, more reflective moments—we know are mistaken. So rhetoric can free one even from one's own ignorance, disclosing the weaknesses of one's own idea; having done so, it can then free others. Indeed, in freeing others, one frees oneself. I realize that this is quite a claim. After defining rhetoric and examining its constituent appeals and parts, I will make good on it.

[1.3] According to Aristotle, rhetoric is “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever” (I.2.I). We need to discuss that definition at length. There are three essential parts to the definition. Generally, rhetoric is a faculty of mind. Two other aspects differentiate it from other such faculties: first, this faculty of mind discovers means of persuasion; second, it does so in particular circumstances. Rhetoric is not a formula, but a faculty; though it involves formulae, it is not essentially formulaic. A formula is a “rule” of composition, but such “rules” are themselves the result of thought. For example, every reader of this book is likely a master of a contemporary formula of composition, the Five-Paragraph Essay. The “rule” is this: every essay has five paragraphs—an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. Three other formulae follow: The introduction should begin generally and funnel into one’s thesis, the last sentence of the first paragraph; the next three paragraphs should be numbered—first, second, and third; and, finally, the conclusion should summarize the essay and funnel out toward some very general point. One can write such an essay without much reflection at all. Here is a very brief Five-Paragraph Essay:

Eating is important. Because everyone eats, restaurants have an important social purpose. My favorite restaurant is McDonald’s. I like McDonald’s for three reasons.



## THE OFFICE OF ASSERTION

First, I like McDonald's because the food is very good. The Big Mac is particularly tasty, so I order one every time I go there.

Second, I like McDonald's because the food is inexpensive. I can eat lunch for under four dollars. This means that I can eat there often.

Third, I like McDonald's because someone I don't like works there, and, while I enjoy my inexpensive lunch, I can watch him slave over the grill for minimum wage.

In conclusion, I like McDonald's because the food is good and inexpensive, and the staff entertaining.

Does this essay sound familiar? The reader's essays have been much more subtle, no doubt; even so, once a formula is so easy to parody, it has probably lost its persuasive force. This formula does do limited work, granted, and there may be rhetorical situations when it is appropriate, even graceful. But the formula is not very flexible. Some of the "rules" of composition are often not rules at all, then. There are rhetorical principles which usually operate in most situations; there are even formulae which make composition much easier. In fact, the Five-Paragraph Essay is a variation of a much more flexible, classical shape that we will examine in Chapter 3. But rhetoric is not essentially those formulae; essentially, it is the faculty of discovering them. The Greek for "faculty" is *dunamis*, "power or capacity"; *dunamis* is the root of the English word "dynamism." Rhetoric is the power or capacity of the mind to discover, the

actualization of a human intellectual potential that, when actualized, releases energy.

[1.4] So far, of course, that is true of any other discipline. The first *differentia*, or distinguishing characteristic, separating rhetoric from other disciplines is that it is always discovering means of persuasion. For Aristotle, philosophy discovers truth; rhetoric, the means of convincing an audience of that truth. However, rhetoric often helps us discover what we believe about a subject as well, even as we are learning how to convince an audience of its truth. Although Aristotle probably would not agree, philosophy does not always precede rhetoric; instead, rhetoric is often an occasion for philosophy. As one searches for means of persuasion about one's subject, one learns more about it. Generally, there are three "means of persuasion": *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*—the logical, emotional, and ethical appeals. All three are legitimate, and all three are part of any suasion. *Logos*, though, is the primary appeal in academic rhetoric. One argues that one's case is the most reasonable. At times, one will arouse and direct a reader's emotion; at times, one will represent oneself in such a way as to establish one's own intellectual and moral authority. Even so, *logos*—to repeat—is the central appeal in academic discourse. Rhetoric, then, is here the faculty of discovering the most convincing *logos*.



[1.5] Rhetoric's second *differentia* is contingency. The rhetorical faculty of discovering the most convincing *logos* always operates in particular circumstances. One does not always argue in the same way regardless of circumstance. Although there are general principles of persuasion, one must accommodate variables, four of which we need to examine here: genre, subject, audience, and purpose. First, different genres—or kinds of writing—lead to different resources. For example, if one is writing a letter, one would probably be better served imitating another letter rather than a short story. (I will not discuss this generic variable since the present book concerns only the academic essay.) Second, different subjects entail different appeals: each discipline looks at the world differently, a disciplinary vision always both allowing some arguments and precluding others. The papers you wrote in high school for English probably differed from those you wrote for history. The general method of rhetorical investigation is always in creative tension with disciplinary methods. An academic subject demands certain appeals; particular subjects then demand even more refined ones. Third, different audiences demand different approaches. One does not write a letter or an e-mail message the same way to a sibling as to a parent, for example. Academic audiences, in particular, are peculiar. Educated, critical—even impatient—the academic is a difficult audience to write for. Academics expect that students will be like them, and one of the things you learn at a university is the



## Introduction

“way” to respond academically to the world. You imitate your professors to learn that “way,” not necessarily by parroting their actual arguments—though a few demand just that—but instead by imitating their methods of argumentation. Indeed, one of the purposes of academic rhetoric is to learn that “way.” Fourth, different purposes demand different appeals. The reader may believe that the primary purpose of academic writing is a good grade; such a grade is only a sign, however, a sign of achievement. Your primary rhetorical purpose in academic writing should be to achieve and share the intellectual excellence or virtue of understanding. Regardless of the subject, regardless of the professor, the best student is the one whose written work persuades the reader—whether a faculty member, a tutor, or a fellow student—to take pleasure in the operation of such a mind. That pleasure is educational, the pleasure of experiencing a free mind releasing the energy of *logos*. Using Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, one can see its substance: writing within a genre to an audience about a subject, the rhetor finds means of persuasion to achieve the end of persuasion, whose own yet further end is understanding.

[1.6] We can now see that rhetoric is the intellectual power to discover, even fashion, formulae to persuade an academic audience to believe that one’s argument about the subject at hand is true. Having defined rhetoric, we are ready to examine its three

## THE OFFICE OF ASSERTION

#8 parts, discrete but related elements of the art of composition: invention, organization, and style. This examination will be brief because each is the focus of its own chapter. In short, invention is what you argue; organization, in what order you argue; style, how you argue. (In the classical rhetorical tradition, there were two other elements, memory and delivery, both of which are essential to spoken rhetoric, but not to written.) An essay's substance is the invention or discovery both of the argument that guides the proofs, or points, and of the proofs that themselves defend that argument. Though invention is necessary, it is not, however, sufficient; that is, it has to be present, but other things have to be present as well. The discovered matter has to be shaped, given form. Organization gives form to the argumentative matter, providing a beginning, a middle, and an end to the small universe of the essay. The ordered substance must then be communicated through the medium of style, the words and sentences that carry the reader through that small universe.

[1.7] The parts of rhetoric provide the shape of this book. I will explain invention in much greater detail in Chapter 2; organization, in Chapter 3; and style, in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I will explain how these three parts can operate as a writing process: A first draft invents; a second arranges; a third stylizes. This three-part understanding of the essay in-



## Introduction

forms my discussion of one student's essay on Homer's *Odyssey*, an essay I have included to indicate not only that undergraduates can write excellent essays, but also that they can master difficult and important texts.

[1.8] How does the art of rhetoric defined and outlined above liberate both rhetorician and audience, though? By providing the writer with the power to give shape to the reader's world. Richard Weaver, in *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, offers a fine explanation of just this phenomenon:

[T]he right to utter a sentence is one of the very greatest liberties; and we are entitled to little wonder that freedom of utterance should be, in every society, one of the most contentious and ill-defined rights. The liberty to impose this formal unity is a liberty to handle the world, to remake it, if only a little, and to hand it to others in a shape which may influence their actions. It is interesting to speculate whether the Greeks did not, for this very reason, describe the man clever at speech as *deinos*, an epithet meaning, in addition to "clever," "fearful" and "terrible." The sentence through its *office of assertion* is a force adding itself to the forces of the world, and therefore the man clever with his sentences . . . was regarded with that uneasiness we feel in the presence of power. The changes wrought by

#19

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#9



## THE OFFICE OF ASSERTION

sentences are changes in the world rather than the physical earth, but it is to be remembered that changes in the world bring about changes in the earth. (118-19, my emphasis)

#10  
The study of rhetoric educates one in a particular liberty, the "liberty to handle the world, to remake it, if only a little, and to hand it to others in a shape which may influence their actions." Through this "office of assertion," the writer is a leader of souls. As Plato explains in the *Phaedrus*, rhetoric is "the art of soul-leading by means of words" (261a). Each time one asks another person to read one's work, one is in the Socratic position of leading that reader through the small world of the essay, a reading experience that gives shape somehow to the world itself. Ray DiLorenzo argues in *Peitho: A Classical Rhetoric* that rhetoric is "the care of words and things"; that care is associative, a practice one learns—and never stops learning—in the presence of others, the ones you lead and are led by. Such soul-leading is a liberal power, one which in its finest and fullest manifestation is a form of love: the finest rhetorician not only loves wisdom, but also loves others who do so. The finest rhetor, then, is a friend. As Aristotle explains in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue" (8.3.6). The best university is a rhetorical community of friends, and the ultimate purpose of this book is to teach the reader how to live within such a commu-

nity with words so full of care that they release the light of brilliance.

[1.9] It is, of course, the nature of a liberal art that its study is a good in and of itself, regardless of its utility as a means to some other end. As John Henry Newman puts it in *The Idea of a University*, knowledge, "prior to its being a power . . . is a good; it is not only an instrument, but an end" (137). Rhetoric is certainly a powerful instrument, but, I will argue, it is also an object of knowledge that is good in and of itself. It is difficult to imagine that rhetoric *could* be such an art; after all, its end is persuasion, and persuasion by its very nature involves yet a further end. The rhetor persuades his or her audience to believe and/or to do something else. This is often the case, granted. Even so, in its highest form, rhetoric reflects upon such further ends, even if from within its own highly contingent circumstances. What is the end of persuasion in an academic community? The truth of the matter at hand, not as an object possessed, but as a disposition toward the subject, a disposition that is truer than before the rhetorical moment, a disposition shared with one's audience. That disposition is, according to Socrates, the highest good of human life, for, as he would have it, the unexamined life is not worth living. The care of words and things—that is, the care of things through the care of words—in a generous, disciplined forum: this human activity is rhetorical through-



## THE OFFICE OF ASSERTION

out, the true influence of friends who have, as Phaedrus puts it at the close of the *Phaedrus*, "everything in common" (279c), in particular the shared motion toward the real. As you can see, we will be discussing more than punctuation.

## 6

### *Conclusion: Rhetoric as the Office of Assertion*

[6.1] This conclusion can be brief. "The sentence through its office of assertion is a force adding itself to the forces of the world": Richard Weaver articulates the defining principle of the classical rhetorical tradition—rhetoric moves an audience, and that movement is a "force" because all agents of influence move others. This movement can take two forms. In the first form, one moves others without their awareness or consent. This motion can appear to be a kind of magic, the rhetor casting a spell on his or her audience, and, in fact, some theorists of rhetoric believe that is exactly what rhetoric essentially is. In the second form, though, one moves another to move him or herself. What is so compelling about rhetoric is that the true rhetorical spell does not corrupt, but rather restores and exercises the liberty of reflection and action on behalf of rhetor and audience. In the rhetorical community of a good university, rhetors become audiences, and audiences



rhetors. This is another way of saying that, in such a Socratic environment, every teacher is a student and every student a teacher, both giver and receiver of slight but distinct attractions toward reality.

[6.2] It may seem strange to consider invention [2], organization [3], and style [4] as forms of attraction, but that is what they are. When you persuade readers to believe [1.3-8] that your thesis [2.3] is true because you have defended it with developed ideas [2.4-14] and explicated text [2.15-17]; because you have arranged that developed, explicit thesis into a cosmic whole [3.1-2] with a beginning [3.3-7], a middle [3.8-10], and an end [3.11-13]; because you have styled that harmonic case with mature diction [4.4-6], artful predications [4.7-11], and imaginative figures of speech [4.12-15]: When you persuade readers thus, you are attracting them toward a truer grasp of the idea, event, text, or artifact under discussion, moving them closer to it. The motive character of rhetoric explains Plato's understanding in the *Phaedrus* that rhetoric is the art of soul-leading through language, that rhetoric is essentially erotic, arousing as it does our desire to move toward the real that is manifest in any true word. A fine essay is a gift.

[6.3] One might go so far as to say that the office of assertion is *the* office of human association. In all

## Conclusion

of your many offices, you are what Weaver calls in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* a "language citizen": #43

Like the political citizen defined by Aristotle, language citizenship makes one a potential magistrate, or one empowered to decide. The work is best carried on, however, by those who are aware that language must have some connection to the intelligential world, and that is why one must think about the rhetorical nature even of grammatical categories. (142)

The language citizenship you acquire during your undergraduate career will certainly prepare you for many other offices—in your personal, academic, and professional lives—and in this regard your rhetorical education will certainly be practical. There is little writing you will do from this point on that will not be improved by attention to your class essays. Such citizenship is not simply utilitarian, nor is it instruction that simply "norms" the young to serve society, a sacrifice of self. In his discussion of bilingual education in *Hunger for Memory*, Richard Rodriguez distinguishes between private and public individuality in order to celebrate the adulthood of what Weaver calls "language citizenship":

But the bilingualists simply scorn the value and necessity of assimilation. They do not realize that there are *two ways* a person is individualized. So they do not realize that while



one suffers a diminished sense of *private* individuality by becoming assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of public individuality. (26)

Whether you agree with Rodriguez on bilingual education or not, his point stands: public individuality, what the classical rhetoricians might call *ethos*, requires that you have command of the public language. Though not in the least romantic, the classical rhetorical tradition may very well be the best way to cultivate your public individuality.

[6.4] This would, indeed, be a civic good, a good that would, I believe, improve our democratic culture. The more articulate our citizens, the more productive and flourishing would be our economic and civic life. Even so, such a rhetorical education is a good in and of itself, a liberal art. What is the good of understanding and employing language well during occasions of public individuality? In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf explains that the language citizen or public individual—the writer—has a greater share of reality: “Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more fully than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us” (114). All liberal arts, in both the sciences and the humanities, are animated by the fundamental human desire to know, the fulfillment of which is a

## Conclusion

good, even if it provides no economic or political benefit whatsoever. An education for economic productivity and political utility *alone* is an education for slaves, but an education for finding, collecting, and communicating reality is an education for free people, people free to know what is so. Remember, knowing the real is a good before it is a power. What is that reality? Well, that, you see, is the very question *you* will need to answer as you take up the office of assertion, asserting where you stand, and standing afterwards in the presence of what you have asserted. Reader: stand by your word.