# 1

# *How Many "Rhetorics"?*

*Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?*

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapter 2

*Rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit.*

John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

*The new rhetoric covers the whole range of discourse that aims at persuasion and conviction, whatever the audience addressed and whatever the subject matter.*

Chaim Perelman

Any confident claim about the importance of rhetorical studies requires as a first step some sorting of diverse definitions. No one definition will ever pin rhetoric down. As Aristotle insisted, in the first major work about it – *The Art of Rhetoric* – rhetoric has no specific territory or subject matter of its own, since it is found everywhere. But it is important to escape the reductions of rhetoric to the non-truth or even anti-truth kinds. The term must always include both the verbal and visual garbage flooding our lives and the tools for cleaning things up.[1]

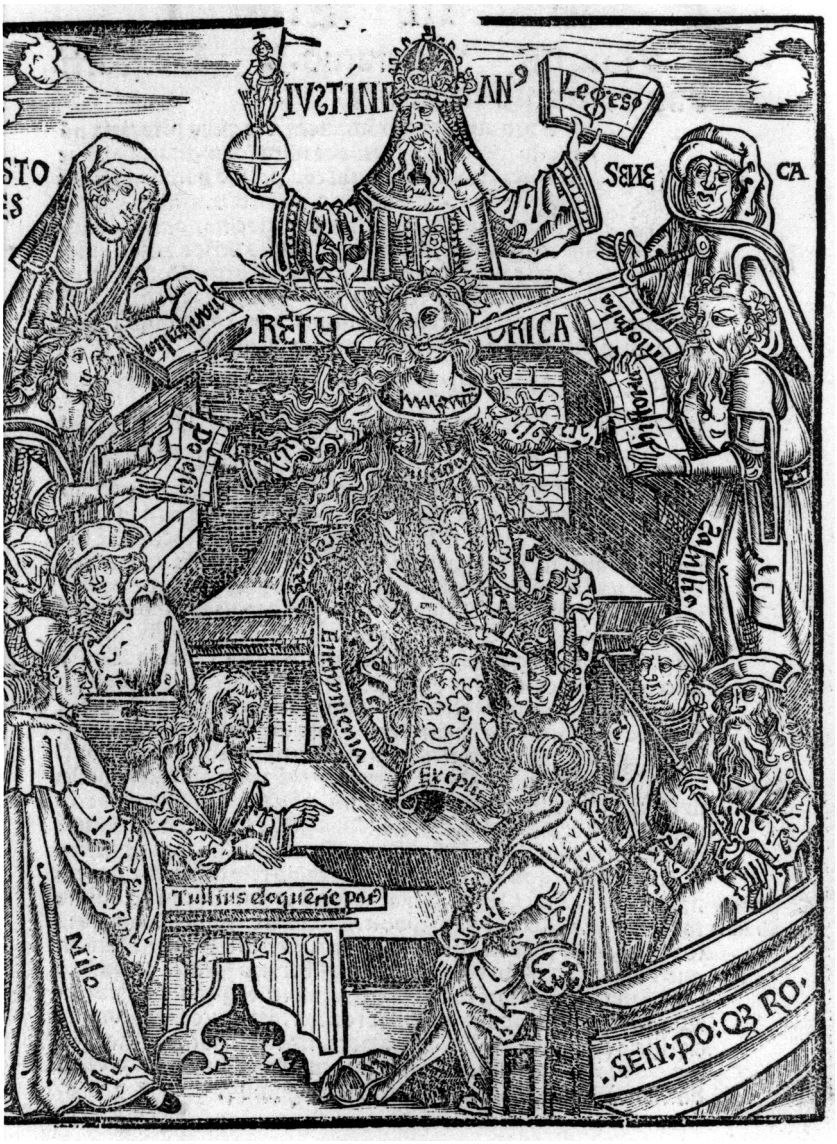
Contrasting definitions of rhetoric, both as the art of discourse and as a study of its resources and consequences, have filled our literature,

from the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and other classicists, on through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, until today. In its beginning, rhetoric was often confined to the oratory of males; usually it was the range of resources for winning in politics. By now everyone rejects the male emphasis and many agree to extend the terms, as I have already done here, to cover more than all verbal exchange; it includes all forms of communication short of physical violence, even such gestures as raising an eyebrow or giving the finger.[2]

From the pre-Socratics through about two millennia, most definitions, even when warning against rhetoric's powers of destruction, saw it as at least one of the indispensable human arts. Nobody questioned the importance of *studying* it systematically. Even Plato, perhaps the most negative critic of rhetoric before the seventeenth century, saw its study as essential. Though he often scoffed at it as only the Sophistic "art of degrading men's souls while pretending to make them better" (from the *Gorgias*), he always at least implied that it had to be central to any inquiry about thinking.

Thus for millennia scholars and teachers assumed that every student should have extensive training in rhetoric's complexities. Sometimes it was even placed at the top of the arts, as a monarch supervising all or most inquiry (See p. 5). The queen was of course often dethroned, becoming for many at best a mere courtier, or even a mere servant assisting the other three primary arts: logic, grammar, and dialectic. Even the most favorable critics recognized that in its worst forms it was one of the most dangerous of human tools, while at its best it was what made civilized life possible. Here are a few of the best-known premodern definitions:

- "Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic. It is the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion." (Aristotle)
- "Rhetoric is one great art comprised of five lesser arts: *inventio* [usually translated as invention but I prefer discovery], *dispositio, elocutio, memoria*, and *pronunciatio*. It is speech designed to persuade." (Cicero)




Rhetorica waving her sword over other sciences and arts.

- "Rhetoric is the science of speaking well, the education of the Roman gentleman, both useful and a virtue." (Quintilian)
- "Rhetoric is the art of expressing clearly, ornately (where necessary), persuasively, and fully the truths which thought has discovered acutely." (St. Augustine)
- "Rhetoric is the application of reason to imagination for the better moving of the will. It is not solid reasoning of the kind science exhibits." (Francis Bacon)

With the explosion of passionate "scientific rationality" in the Enlightenment, more and more authors, while continuing to study and teach rhetoric, followed Bacon in placing it down the scale of genuine pursuit of truth. The key topic, *inventio* (the discovery of solid argument), was shoved down the ladder, while *elocutio* (style, eloquence) climbed to the top rung. By the eighteenth century almost everyone, even those producing full textbooks for the study of rhetoric, saw it as at best a useful appendage to what hard thinking could yield, as in the Augustine definition above. As scholars embraced the firm distinction between fact and value, with knowledge confined to the domain of fact, rhetoric was confined to sharpening or decorating either unprovable values or factual knowledge derived elsewhere. Even celebrators of rhetorical study tended to equivocate about rhetoric's claim as a source of knowledge or truth – a tool of genuine reasoning.[3] Here is George Campbell's slightly equivocal praise, in mid-eighteenth century: "Rhetoric is that art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end. All the ends of speaking are reducible to four; every speech being intended to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, and to influence the will."[4]

Many others, even among those trained in classical rhetoric, became much more negative. Perhaps the best summary of the negative view of rhetoric is that of John Locke, who wrote, in his immensely influential *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690):

> [If] we would speak of *things as they are*, we must allow that all the arts of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative

> application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but *to insinuate wrong ideas*, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed *are perfect cheats*: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, *wholly to be avoided*; *and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault*, either of the language or person that makes use of them. . . . It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since *rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit*, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and I doubt not but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said this much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. (Book 3, chapter 10, conclusion; my italics)

As such rhetoric-laden mistreatments flourished (note Locke's use of "the fair sex"!), Aristotle's description of rhetoric as the counterpart or sibling (*antistrophos*) of dialectic became reinterpreted as a reinforcement of the view that even at best it is no more than our resource for jazzing up or bolstering ideas derived elsewhere. And more and more thinkers reduced it to rhetrickery, sometimes even today simply called "mere rhetoric."

It was only with the twentieth-century revival that the term again began to receive more favorable definitions. Aristotle's claim that it was the *antistrophos* of dialectic became again interpreted to mean that rhetoric and dialectic overlap, as equal companions, each of them able to cover everything.[5] By now, many of us rhetoricians have decided – to repeat – that all hard thought, even what Aristotle called dialectic, either depends on rhetoric or can actually be described as a version of it. Here are some modern additions to the expanded definitions:

- "Rhetoric is the study of misunderstandings and their remedies." (I. A. Richards, 1936)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Listening-rhetoric (LR)**: The whole range of communicative arts for reducing misunderstanding by paying full attention to opposing views.[9]

**Rhetrickery**: The whole range of shoddy, dishonest communicative arts producing misunderstanding – along with other harmful results. The arts of making the worse seem the better cause.
**Rhetorology**: The deepest form of LR: the systematic probing for "common ground."
**Rhetor**: The communicator, the persuader or understander.
**Rhetorician**: The student of such communication.
**Rhetorologist**: The rhetorician who practices rhetorology, pursuing common ground on the assumption – often disappointed – that disputants can be led into mutual understanding.

## Obvious Synonyms

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

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

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