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Modernism's Rhetoric (with a note on terror)
*By Way of Introduction*¹

According to Jean-François Lyotard, “it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms.”² This statement succinctly introduces the problem of modernism and rhetoric, because the sublime was first theorized by Longinus, of whom Lyotard ominously observes: “The author was a rhetorician. Basically, he taught those oratorical devices with which a speaker can persuade or move (depending on the genre) his audience.”³ Longinus’s contribution to classical rhetoric, *Peri Hypsous (On the Sublime)*, was intended as a stylistics textbook on how to express and convey the feeling of the sublime, but, as Lyotard remarks, “the sublime, the indeterminate, were destabilizing the text’s didactic intention.”⁴ The sublime, as Longinus sensed, Boileau affirmed, and Lyotard underscores, undermines prescriptive efforts and ultimately escapes the capacities of rhetoric. The sublime was the cornerstone of modern (Romantic) aesthetics, and is recovered by Lyotard as the defining element of “the modern” in art, associated particularly strongly with the avant-garde in the broadest sense of

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² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 77.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 94. Longinus’s treatise is discussed in the essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

unconventional, non-academic art. Since the sublime is the main counterforce to rhetoric, it follows that modernism by definition counteracted rhetoric in all its forms.

This issue is not about the sublime in modernism, but about literary modernism's alleged opposition to rhetoric. Lyotard's case is just one example of how criticism has reiterated this familiar model of modernism as an anti-rhetorical enterprise. The articles collected here give more detailed examples of how New Criticism as well as eminent critics like Hugh Kenner perpetuated the prevailing account of an anti-rhetorical modernism that was installed by modernist writers themselves. Wishing to establish a clear demarcation between rhetoric and literature and to exclude rhetorical forms of expression from their literary language, it is regularly argued, modernist writers moved from a sociolect to an idiolect.⁵ Rhetoric offered a practical set of tools enabling effective communication in every situation, on every subject. It was allegedly because of this all-encompassing reach of rhetoric (from practical politics to vulgar journalism) that modernists kept it at bay.

Inevitably, however, this narrative runs up against a contrary account that ostensibly invalidates it completely. For haven't we been told over and over again that rhetoric died in the nineteenth century? And that it was therefore already dead by the time the modernists arrived? Rhetoric scholars have consistently painted the history of rhetoric as a steady descent from the heights of, first, the Classics, and later, the Renaissance. By the nineteenth century—after the emergence of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism—rhetoric was past saving: commonly used metaphors for this last stage are those of “end,” “death,” and “eclipse.”⁶ If the incompatibility of those historical accounts of modernism on the one hand and rhetoric on the other shows one thing, it is that

⁵ See, for instance, Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 219.

⁶ See, among others, Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); George Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Antoine Compagnon, “La rhétorique à la fin du XIX^e siècle (1875-1900),” in *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne*, ed. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999), 1215-60.

claims about modernism's opposition against rhetoric often forget to consider rhetoric itself, overlooking the fact that rhetoric of course knew a development of its own and that its existence and its features were always historically situated. A few general questions therefore need to be addressed: What was rhetoric at the beginning of the twentieth century? What did it mean to literary writers at the time? Recognizing the actual state (and status) of rhetoric in the age of modernism, the essays collected here examine different ways in which modernism actually reshaped and pursued the practice and the idea of rhetoric.

It is important to recognize that rhetoric had not died or disappeared in the nineteenth century—writers in the early twentieth century were not seeing things that were not there—but that it had profoundly changed. Studies that describe rhetoric's decline and eventual extinction adopt the rather narrow perspective of the *Nachleben* of classical rhetorical theories and systems. They have a clear preference for those historical periods when there is a perceptible return to or reevaluation of classical ideals concerning the function of oratory in society. Rhetoric certainly appears more alive and relevant from our point of view at those stages in its history when oratory played a vital role in civic culture than when rhetoric was reduced to prose composition (which is what happened to the discipline in the late nineteenth century). Yet, it is not because the *idea* of classical rhetoric may have died in the nineteenth century that rhetoric itself—as a discipline and as a social practice—necessarily vanished. In an age in which the long process of modernization profoundly transformed the culture as a whole, rhetoric evidently also underwent radical change. Rhetorical practices and theories of different kinds thus continued to exist after the turn of the century—that means, to co-exist with modernist attitudes to language and writing.

Several scholars have offered explanations of this process of transformation that rhetoric underwent in the course of the nineteenth century, all of them emphasizing that rhetoric lost much of its prestige and cultural relevance in this period. Referring to the work of historian W. S. Howell, John Guillory has argued that the so-called “New Rhetoric” of Adam Smith and Hugh Blair steered rhetoric away from its classical goal of persuasion and toward the more modest

goal of communication, bringing it closer to traditional grammar.⁷ John Bender and David Wellbery, in a more wide-focused attempt to explain the obsolescence of traditional rhetoric in modernity, have provided an overview of five large-scale shifts travelling on the back of the long process of modernization in the nineteenth century. Those are (1) the new objectivity in Enlightenment scientific discourse; (2) the new subjectivity in Romantic aesthetic discourse; (3) the liberal political discourse of the public sphere; (4) the rise of print culture and alphabetization; and (5) the rise of national languages and linguistic standardization.⁸ Hayden White, finally, has reaffirmed and elaborated this account by describing the separation between literature and rhetoric since Romanticism as the mystification of “literature” in opposition to rhetoric’s focus on “literacy.”⁹ The former came to be understood as a rare and precious talent, while the latter was a teachable skill. Literature, in other words, developed into an independent artistic field with a seemingly self-sufficient organization and an ostensibly autonomous discourse, *the literary*, defined by *literariness*.

From within this apparently autonomous literary field, a score of modernist writers undeniably expressed their disgust with rhetoric, a fact which contributes to the notion of modernist anti-rhetoricity. W. B. Yeats, for instance, famously proclaimed:

We make of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty.¹⁰

⁷ John Guillory, “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines,” in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 19-43.

⁸ John Bender and David E. Wellbery, “Rhetoricity: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric,” in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3-39.

⁹ Hayden White, “The Suppression of Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Rhetoric Canon*, ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 21-32.

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 331.

As argued above, rhetoric had profoundly changed by the twentieth century. It therefore remains to be determined what these writers meant when they used the term “rhetoric.” Surely they must have known that the domination of the classical rhetorical *paideia* had long passed by the beginning of the twentieth century? Why, then, did they still feel the need to distinguish literary writing from rhetoric?

Paradoxically, this was a late reaction to rhetoric’s earlier decline. Rhetoric had provided a clearly defined “literary” (or cultured) language up to the eighteenth century: “literature” comprised all texts that were written well, that is, in accordance with the rules of the art of rhetoric. With the transformation of rhetoric in the nineteenth century, this self-evident set of rules was washed away. As a result, literary writers had to create a literary language out of everyday, ordinary, non-literary language: the literary came to be understood as a special use of ordinary language. This logic of deviation from the “normal” was in turn perceived as an anti-rhetorical move that needed to be reaffirmed over and over: it exposed the latent rhetoric of commonplaces and clichés present in everyday language—a language these writers found intensified in popular journalism, propaganda, and advertising. Complaints that were made by means of the term “rhetoric” were thus directed at the nature of language itself, and at the perceived danger that lay in the abuse of that nature. The resistance to cliché was in fact a realization of the figural nature of language. It signals the modernist awareness of the pervasiveness of rhetoric in all of discourse, which Nietzsche had described already in “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (1873).¹¹

A sense of discomfort with the general rhetoricality of language could thus be regarded as a typical aspect of the modernist sensibility, but this in itself tells us very little about the way in which modernist writers actually looked upon rhetoric as a theory of writing and speaking and as a rule-governed literary practice.¹² Moreover, it suggests that every writer took an unambiguous and

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139-53.

¹² Bender and Wellbery use the term “rhetoricality” to describe what they see as “the modernist return of rhetoric” (3). Yet, when rhetoric is in such a way turned into a metadiscursive term, it is no longer useful as a historical category. If rhetoric, as Bender and Wellbery write, “becomes something like the condition of our existence” (25), one

unchangeable stance toward the notion of rhetoric, understood as the problem of the relationship between literature and language. In reality, things were more complicated and rhetoric was not ruled out as a solution to this problem. Turning to the work of Jean Paulhan makes it possible to see that the difference between rhetoric and anti-rhetoric was not always clear-cut and that a reevaluation of rhetoric was still imaginable in the early twentieth century.

Paulhan, as is well-known, was a major critical voice in the interwar period, among others as the long-time editor of the *Nouvelle Revue française*. In his book *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la Terreur dans les lettres* (The Flowers of Tarbes, Or Terror in Literature, 1936, 1941), he described the long-standing opposition among writers and critics between two positions: “Terror” and “Rhetoric.” The Terrorist writer is thus opposed to rhetoric, to conventional language, and ultimately to literature itself. In the twentieth century, Paulhan suggested, the Terrorist position was being manned by the radical avant-gardes, most notably, in France, the surrealists (with whom Paulhan himself had been related shortly after the First World War). He characterized these writers as “misologists,” who aggressively ventilated their mistrust of the perceived power of words, attempting at all cost to bypass language in order to present their unique experience, utterly free of rhetorical conventions.¹³ As Michel Beaujour comments,

Terror wants to demarcate the writer at all cost, demands that each phrase be in a way ungrammatical, each word a neologism, and language an idiolect. Or rather, from Terror’s own perspective, that those words, those phrases evaporate, so to speak, in order to reveal the unheard, the unseen, the ineffable, and to affirm a mode of feeling or perceiving liberated from the constraints of language, of culture, of the society where its vision is felt.¹⁴

need no longer view the role of rhetoric as an actual set of ideas and rules about writing and speaking in the early twentieth century, which is precisely our concern here.

¹³ Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes, or Terror in Literature*, trans. Michael Syrotinski (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 2006), 34.

¹⁴ Michel Beaujour, *Terreur et Rhétorique: Breton, Bataille, Leiris, Paulhan, Barthes et Cie. Autour du surréalisme* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1999), 14. Our translation.

The Terrorist's hatred of cliché risks destroying language itself, leading to a dead end where human communication becomes impossible. The writer who is a "Rhetorician," by contrast, finds in the pre-existing templates offered by rhetoric his inspiration and his freedom. He feels himself at home in language, and takes literature for what it is: an art of language.

Despite the stark opposition Paulhan establishes, however, it turns out Terror and Rhetoric are not so easily dissociated, and, when pushed to extremes, tend to turn into each other.¹⁵ On the one hand, Rhetoric can neutralize independent thinking by imposing prefabricated linguistic patterns, thus holding a potential danger and dictatorial violence that we would associate with Terror. On the other hand, the most radical Terrorist writer is also the most knowledgeable Rhetorician, since his attempts to avoid and deconstruct the tropes and commonplaces of everyday language make him more preoccupied with rhetoric than the Rhetorician himself.

Paulhan placed himself on the side of Rhetoric, but he stated that a simple return to classical rhetoric was out of the question. What he proposed under the term "Maintenance" was a kind of linguistic education that dispelled the fear of the abusive power of words by acknowledging and accepting the commonplaces and conventions of language.¹⁶ This was a rhetorical project in the sense that it made commonplaces common and familiar again, communicating a specific meaning in an expressive manner: it meant to recommunalize rhetorical tropes in an effort to safeguard language and communication. While Pound's turn to the "commonplaces" of Confucian wisdom could be related to this attitude,¹⁷ it can also be argued, for instance, that T. S. Eliot displayed a similar affinity with Paulhan, "committ[ing] himself precisely to a delicate care of the social medium

¹⁵ Peter Nicholls, "Poetry and Rhetoric: Modernism and Beyond," in *Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 186.

¹⁶ Paulhan, *Flowers of Tarbes*, 87-94.

¹⁷ Nicholls, "Poetry and Rhetoric," 186.

that language is.”¹⁸ In fact, all kinds of modernist writers, this issue aims to show, sided with Paulhan.

One thing is remarkable about “Terror,” the ominous term, suggesting danger or threat, Paulhan chose for that misdirected hatred of language: as Éric Trudel argues, “under the Occupation, ‘Terror’ evokes the memory of 1793.”¹⁹ Robespierre’s regime of Terror quickly followed what he himself called the “sublime drama” of the Revolution. Paulhan’s Terror thus evokes an aggressive and overpowering event, and as such links the avant-garde enterprise to the sublime. “Terror” then acquires a particular significance as the counterpart of “Rhetoric”: more than just an assault on language, it wishes to subordinate language to an expression of the ineffable, the unrepresentable, that is, the sublime. However, Paulhan saw in a reevaluation of a new Rhetoric an escape route out of the reign of Terror. By shedding new light on a new, twentieth-century rhetoric at the heart of literary modernism, this issue shows that “the modern” in writing was not absolutely defined by the anti-rhetorical sublime, but was able to accommodate and reshape rhetoric.

¹⁸ Matthias Somers and Éric Trudel, “A New ‘Rhetoric’ for Modernism? Jean Paulhan and the Ambivalences of English Criticism,” *Arcadia* 50.2 (2015): 268.

¹⁹ Éric Trudel, *La Terreur à l’oeuvre: théorie, poétique et éthique chez Jean Paulhan* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2007). Our translation.