Educating the Eloquent Speaker

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The early efforts of the classical world's greatest orator were derided for their "strange and uncouth style, which was cumbered with long sentences and tortured with formal arguments to a most harsh and disagreeable excess." To complicate his problems, he had "a weakness in his voice, a perplexed and indistinct utterance and a shortness of breath, which, by breaking and disjointing his sentences much obscured the sense and meaning of what he spoke." So, "in the end, being quite disheartened, he forsook the assembly."

When Demosthenes complained to Satyrus that "drunken sots, mariners, and illiterate fellows were heard, and had the hustings for their own, while he himself was despised," the actor encouraged him to practice his delivery. "Hereupon," Plutarch continues, "he built himself a place to study under ground . . . and hither he would come constantly every day to form his action and to exercise his voice; and here he would continue, oftentimes without intermission, two or three months together, shaving one half of his head, that so for shame he might not go abroad, though he desired it ever so much." In the privacy of his study, he also formulated arguments for and against the matters that had crossed his path that day and reworked the speeches he had heard others deliver. "Hence, it was that he was looked upon as a person of no great natural genius, but one who owed all the power and ability he had in speaking to labour and industry." ¹

Those who doubt that eloquence can be learned need only guess
which more recent but still revered speaker delivered this passage in his youth:

I know the great volcano at Washington, aroused and directed by the evil spirit that reigns there, is belching forth the lava of political corruption in a current, broad and deep, which is sweeping with frightful velocity over the whole length and breadth of the land, bidding fair to leave unscathed no green spot of living thing; while on its bosom are riding, like demons on the waves of Hell, the imps of that evil spirit, and fiendishly taunting all those who dare resist its destroying course with the hopelessness of their effort; and, knowing this, I cannot deny that all may be swept away. Broken by it, I, too, may be; bow to it I never will. . . . If ever I feel the soul within me elevate and expand to those dimensions not wholly unworthy of its Almighty Architect, it is when I contemplate the cause of my country, deserted by all the world beside, and I standing up boldly and alone and hurling defiance at her victorious oppressors. Here, without contemplating consequences, before High Heaven, and in face of the world, I swear eternal fidelity to the just cause, as I deem it, of the land of my life, my liberty, and my love.²

Less than two and a half decades later, that speaker would deliver the Gettysburg Address. The transformation is not as astonishing as it at first may seem—few are eloquent from childhood.

Early in his career, another orator “found himself on his feet, with his mind a complete blank, while the awful silence was broken only by friendly, encouraging noises; he stood his ground until at last he could bear it no longer; back in his seat, he could only bury his head in his hands. After his breakdown in the House of Commons he dreaded getting up to speak more than ever. Sometimes he would persuade himself that what he was about to say had already been said, or that the time to say it was past. Any excuse served to keep him in his seat.”³ In 1953, that speaker received the Nobel Prize in literature in part for his “scintillating oratory.” In the dark years of World War II he had rallied his country with ringing speeches. In the most often quoted, he said:

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the
struggle, until, in God's good time, the new world, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.\(^4\)

In 1950, Winston Churchill confided to his physician, “Speaking to five thousand people through a microphone is no more tiring than talking to a hundred. It doesn’t bother me. I’m not overawed by them. I’ve got used to it.”\(^5\)

In the lessons left us by our eloquent ancestors, there is good news and bad. The good news is that, by engaging in certain activities, our innate oratorical talents can be refined. The bad news is that these activities have been lost, stolen, or have strayed from our schools. When speaking held the central role in the conduct of public affairs, the disposition toward eloquence was cultivated. It no longer is.

_Elocuence Flourishes Where Public Speaking Is an Honored Art_

Ancient oratory was considered “a fine art, an art regarded by its cultivators, and by the public, as analogous to sculpture, to poetry, to painting, to music and to acting. This character is common to Greek and Roman oratory.”\(^6\) So, for example, Isocrates notes that listeners broke into loud applause when antitheses, symmetrical clauses, or other striking rhetorical figures were skillfully presented.\(^7\)

Because it was the only way to reach a mass public, speech was not a means of influence but the means. Accordingly, as Whately noted, “the character of Orator, Author, and Politician, almost entirely coincided; he who would communicate his ideas to the world, or would gain political power, and carry his legislative schemes into effect, was necessarily a Speaker; since, as Pericles is made to remark by Thucydides, ‘one who forms a judgment on any point, but cannot explain himself clearly to the people, might as well have never thought at all on the subject.’”\(^8\)

Evidence of the importance of speech can be seen in its choice as the form in which significant ideas would be preserved. A number of Isocrates' undelivered works take the form of speeches as do the Second Philippic of Cicero\(^9\) and Milton’s stirring defense of freedom of the press.

When the world of entertainment, persuasion, and politics was in the main an oral one, listeners were drawn together in large numbers to experience a piece of communication. The speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero drew large audiences. So too in the nineteenth century did the speeches of Webster, Sumner, and Clay.

Not so today. Nearly four out of ten viewers will watch reruns or alternative programming rather than a speech by Rónald Reagan. In-
deed, the Nielsen numbers reveal a decade-long decline in the share of the audience attracted to a presidential speech and a corresponding decline in the total number of viewers. While few would deny that Reagan is a better speaker than either of his two immediate predecessors, more Americans watched Gerald Ford’s speeches than Jimmy Carter’s and more tuned in to hear Carter than Reagan. Where televised presidential speeches once drew a larger audience than the programming they replaced, the prospect of listening to the president now drives viewers away. By contrast, in the nineteenth century, families would walk for miles to spend two hours standing in a field listening to a speech on national affairs.

“Charles Sumner was an aristocrat,” recalled James Burton Pond a century ago. “He was my father’s ideal. After I had got back from Kansas and visited my father’s home in Wisconsin, father said to me: ‘James, the Honorable Charles Sumner is going to speak at R——. We must hear him.’ So we arranged to go. We walked nine miles to hear him speak. My father never spoke of him without giving him his title. He had enjoyed that speech intensely. I do not know whether I did or not. Father occupied a front seat with the intention of rushing up to the platform and greeting him by the hand when he was finished, but the Honorable Charles was too quick for him. He disappeared, got to his hotel, and nobody saw him.”

In the nineteenth century Charles Sumner was accorded the sort of attention now reserved for Charles Kuralt or Charley Pride.

Some symptomatic evidence of the lowly position that public address holds in our society comes in the lack of seriousness accorded it by the mass media. There are no major newspaper or TV critics of oratory as there are of films, television shows, art, music, and theatrical performances. Few reporters would pretend to be critics of any of these arts without special training, yet they routinely categorize a speech as good, effective, memorable, or eloquent. The impulse to assume the role of critic of oratory is a natural one. While few of us act, draw, or play an instrument without special training, most of us speak. That ability prompts the inference I speak therefore I critique.

Knowledgeable critics of film, plays, and television educate the public in their respective arts and in the standards by which these arts should be assessed. The absence of such evaluation of public speech denies the mass audience comparable assistance in evaluating an art that plays a direct role in the affairs of state.

News coverage also devalues the speech. Newspapers once routinely reprinted the texts of important speeches; now, with the exception of The New York Times, few regularly do. Newspapers justified the change
on the same grounds used by politicians to explain why hour-long radio speeches gave way to thirty- and sixty-second spot ads: the public wasn’t paying attention to the full-length speech. In 1913, the Earl of Roseberg voiced the relief with which speakers and newspaper readers greeted a paper filled with “matters of greater interest.” “No conscientious speaker ever rose in the morning and read his morning newspaper without having a feeling of pain, to see in it, reported verbatim, with agonizing conscientiousness, things which he would rather not have said, and things which he thought ought not to bear repetition.” As for readers, “I never could find anybody who read my speeches. It was quite different in the time when I was young, when practically the whole family sat down after breakfast and read the whole debate through. But the present age is in too great a hurry for that . . . [N]ot one man in a hundred ever read the speeches which were so largely reported in the Press. Their removal from the Press gave space to other matters of greater interest, and is one of the greatest reliefs the newspaper reader ever experienced.”

The low regard in which the network news organizations hold the speech is evident in their coverage of the Democratic and Republican national conventions. With the exception of the keynote address, the addresses of major contenders, and the party’s nominees, other speeches are routinely intercut with interviews from the floor or commentary from the booth. So, for example, speeches by likely 1988 candidates Robert Dole and Howard Baker were not heard in their entirety on CBS. Former President Ford’s speech to the Republican convention was picked up midway through by NBC; Dole’s speech also was given abbreviated coverage. NBC excerpted Andrew Young’s speech to the Democrats; CBS ignored it. CBS cut in and out of 1984 contender and 1972 nominee George McGovern’s speech and ignored the speech by Democratic House leader Tip O’Neill. Shirley Chisholm’s speech did not appear on NBC; Marion Barry and Tom Bradley’s nominating speeches were heard there but not on CBS.

If past is prophet, abbreviated coverage of the 1984 conventions meant that the networks denied the public the privilege of assessing the substance and political potential of some important speakers. Hubert Humphrey first caught national attention with his stirring speech on civil rights at the 1948 Democratic convention. John Kennedy gained public notice by narrating the convention film in 1956, visibility that preceded his dash for the vice presidency when Stevenson threw selection of that nominee open to the floor. One of the most eloquent convention speeches given in modern history was the speech with which Eugene McCarthy nominated Adlai Stevenson in 1960. Had these
SPEECH

OF ILLINOIS,

A

APPROVED THE

ADMISSION OF KANSAS

UNDER

THE LECOMPTON CONSTITUTION.

DELIVERED

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,

MARCH 23, 1858.

WASHINGTON:
PRINTED BY LEWIS BROWN,
1858.
speeches been delivered in 1984, none would have occurred during the
times scheduled for regular network coverage. Abbreviated coverage
also meant that the public was denied the right to hear articulate
presenters debate the alternative sides of important platform planks. The
network's decision to minimize coverage meant that the number of
speakers given access to a national audience declined. As a result, the
national audience has no way of knowing whether a Humphrey, a
McCarthy, or a Kennedy debuted on the convention stage. At the same
time, blacking out seconding speeches denied the audience the ability
to assess the bases of support on which each candidate relied and would
depend as president. These speeches also reveal the constituencies a
presidential candidate feels indebted to.

By cluttering the convention floor with reporters, technicians, and
minicams, and by conducting interviews from the floor, the news media
make it nearly impossible for convention delegates to listen to the
speakers. At the 1984 Democratic convention, some delegates carried
pocket radios to be able to hear the speeches.

Television's news broadcasts also devalue the speech. The way in which
we get most of our news means that we hear snippets instead of speeches.
George Washington University's Media Analysis Project found, for ex-
ample, that the average number of seconds a candidate for president
was shown speaking on a network news segment in the 1984 campaign
was 14.79 seconds.

Aware that at best they will receive less than a minute of speaking
time in network evening news and anxious to jet from media market
to media market to capture time on as many local news shows as pos-
sible, presidential candidates deliver speeches that are as short as pos-
sible—less than twenty minutes on the average, with part of that time
t preempted by applause.

Speeches delivered on purchased radio and TV time have been com-
pressed as well. In the early days of radio the hour-long speech was
the norm. By the 1940s the half-hour speech had emerged as the stan-
dard. As entertainment was added to lure and retain audiences, speech
time shrunk. With the advent of television, the half-hour speech re-
appeared but held its own only in 1952. Just as the full speech text was

Today, a voter is hard-pressed to locate a complete text of any important non-
 presidential speech; in the nineteenth century, such speeches were reprinted
 routinely and distributed widely (Courtesy Political History Division, Smith-
sonian)
replaced in newspapers by the brief excerpt or the abstract until that
too was supplanted by the occasional quote within news stories, the
amount of time devoted to political speaking first on radio and then on
television declined. As the media evolved, the shortest speech became
the fittest for survival. By 1956 the cost of air time and the dwindling
attention of the public prompted politicians to purchase five-minute
blocks of speaking time. In the 1970s the five-minute speech gave way
to the sixty-second ad.

Assessing responsibility for the shift is difficult. When politicians paid
for half-hour time slots, as a general rule the public fied in droves to
other channels. The most astonishing instance of this occurred in 1964
when the viewing public chose “Peyton Place” and “Petticoat Junction”
overwhelmingly over Eisenhower’s conversation with Goldwater at Get-
tsburg. It made financial and political sense to give the public what it
was willing to watch.

Those pointing the finger claim that politicians should share the blame.
The short attention span of the public was invited, they reason, in part,
by political sloganeering. By 1964 the public had been conditioned by
spot political ads to expect its political information in twenty-, thirty-,
and sixty-second bites.

The widespread assumption that spots are not as nourishing as longer
speeches is amply justified. When limited to sixty seconds, complex ideas
must either be ignored or treated simplistically. Except in unusual in-
stances, argument will be replaced by assertion. Where a half-hour speech
can be a mural, a thirty-second ad can be little more than a collage.

Spot ads are well equipped to telegraph a candidate’s position on an
issue and to associatively link that position with things we value; they
are ill equipped to build a convincing case for a nuanced position. So,
for example, in 1984, Mondale’s televised ads told us that he was fight-
ing for our future without revealing the nature either of that future or
of the fight he was waging. Reagan’s ads asserted that Mondale would
raise taxes to pay for promises made to special interests. Instead, Mon-
dale had claimed that he would apply the increased revenue to balanc-
ing the budget. To build the case for the incumbent, Reagan’s ads vi-
ually allied his presidency with flag raisings, small-town parades, a
wedding, and smiling people at work.

The format featured in each of the presidential debates from
Kennedy-Nixon through Mondale-Reagan also forced the candidates
to capsulize. In the second Mondale-Reagan debate of 1984, for ex-
ample, answers to panelists’ questions were either two and a half or
one minute long; each candidate was allotted four minutes for a closing
statement. By contrast, in each of their seven senatorial debates of 1858,
Lincoln and Douglas spoke for ninety minutes each on a single topic: the future of slavery in the territories.

Whatever the cause and whoever the culprit, the result of this compression is changed political discourse. Speakers of earlier ages routinely traced the history of the matter under discussion. In the process, they revealed how they saw the world. By contrast, history has little place in contemporary discourse except when selectively marshaled to argue that a proposed policy is a mistake.

In the golden ages, speakers spent time defining their terms, a process that forces assumptions into the open. It made a great deal of difference whether speakers in 1967 saw the Vietnam war as a civil war or as an act of self-defense by the South against invaders from the North. Whether the “Communists” were viewed as a monolithic block composed of China, Russia, and North Vietnam or as dissimilar countries with divergent political systems and interests also made a difference. At the point of definition, such conflicting assumptions are made plain. Without this stage of discourse, we can talk past each other unaware that our primal premises are at odds. The problem is an important one. Few of the recent presidential statements on arms limitation, for instance, have assumed the burden of understanding and explaining the definitions each side brings to the discussion.

Speakers in the golden ages of American, British, Roman, and Greek oratory routinely laid out the range of policy alternatives for examination, scrutinizing each in turn. Only after showing the flaws in the alternative options, weighing the objections to their proposals, and arguing the comparative advantages of the course they favored did they conclude. Such speeches demonstrated that the speaker commanded the facts of the situation, understood the alternatives, and could defend the choice of one over the others.

These speeches engaged the ideas of the opposing sides in a way that moved the argument forward. When the bulk of the available evidence favored one side, such speeches helped audiences toward consensus. By contrast, contemporary political discourse tends to reduce the universe to two sides—one good, one evil—when in fact there may be four or five sides, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. After drawing simplistic and often false dichotomies, contemporary speech tends to canonize one side and anathematize the other.

In the golden ages, speakers lovingly explored the range of available evidence. Today, speeches argue by hitting and running. A single supposedly telling statistic, report, or anecdote is slung under a claim before the speaker moves on.

Then, as now, speakers dramatized their points. Then as now, con-
In the last century, important presidential pronouncements such as Washington's Farewell, Jackson's Veto of the Bank, and Lincoln's second inaugural were permanently printed on cloth and displayed in homes. This silk broadside preserves a proclamation by President Andrew Jackson. (Courtesy Political History Division, Smithsonian)
crete description of the problem was a powerful move. Then, as now, narrative about victims was the stuff of poignant, powerful speech. Such dramatization was formerly an element in a speech, often one that amplified a point already made in other ways. Dramatically illustrated discursive argument has given way to dramatically bodied assertion.

Politicians view exposure on television as a testament to their accomplishments and a warning to their potential opponents. Since drama is to television what honey is to bears, skilled dramatists find themselves on network news more often than skilled speakers who lack dramatic flair. And since television will at most abstract a clip, why bother building a carefully crafted case to a convincing conclusion?

Because television is a visual medium whose natural grammar is associative, a person adept at visualizing claims in dramatic capsules will be able to use television to short-circuit the audience's demand that those claims be dignified with evidence. As I will argue in a later chapter, part of Ronald Reagan's success as a communicator is a function of his ability to use visual vignettes to make unstated arguments.

In the golden ages, as now, speeches revealed the speaker's position. In short ads and in news clips little else is now done. As a result citizens are invited to take one of two postures. They can embrace a position either because it is already theirs and the political statement functions to show that they and the politician are like-minded or they can adopt it because they endorse the politician and hence are willing to take on faith the legitimacy of his or her conclusions. Neither alternative encourages contemplation; neither produces conversion; neither is conducive to long-term commitment.

An audience that accepts a speaker's interpretation of the history of a question, grants the definitions offered, weighs the alternatives and with the speaker finds them wanting, sees the problem in memorable, dramatized human terms, and then reaches the speaker's conclusion is a person likely to retain a commitment to that position. The much discussed volatility of public opinion may be, in part, a by-product of politicians' reliance on granulized forms of communication.

When the public is unwilling or unable to evaluate the reasoned exposition of candidates, it cannot know whether the candidates have examined alternatives to the policies they espouse. Nor can it know whether the would-be leader has understood the lessons of the past. In the absence of the information that can only be provided in longer speech forms, the public cannot scrutinize the reasons that impel the convictions of their leaders. In longer communicative forms, we are better able to see a mind at work.
None of this means that a thirty-second spot is necessarily simple-minded or that a thirty-minute speech is usually substantive. It does mean that it is impossible to adequately warrant complex claims in sixty, thirty, twenty, or fourteen seconds.

The limited amount of time available for network news coverage has exacerbated a second negative tendency in political discourse. While hyperbole has always been with us, until recently nothing in the system has invited it as a norm. Now 435 members of the House and 100 members of the Senate compete for the crumbs of network time left after the president has gotten his share. By dramatizing, kernelizing, and shouting wolf, they bid against each other for that time. In the process, complex ideas are transformed into parodies of their former selves and the capacity of language to express outrage is exhausted.

Whatever its useful commercial and social purposes, product advertising has numbed our ability to appreciate the cost of this compression of political discourse. Day after day radio and TV ads bombard us with messages that argue from unwarranted associations to hyperbolic claims. An audience accustomed to the form and content of such messages is unlikely to do what former White House speechwriter Bill Safire asked when he wrote, “I think we have to send a message to the podium from the audience. We’re ready for more Q. and A. We’re ready for five or ten minutes of sustained explication. A ‘fireside chat’ will not turn out our fires. On the contrary—if a speaker will take the time to prepare, we are prepared to pay in the coin of our attention.” Having sent such a message, we might show our good faith by choosing Roger Mudd’s award-winning documentary “Teddy” over “Jaws” or Eisenhower and Goldwater over “Peyton Place” the next time such a choice confronts us.

By relying on an associative grammar to imply causality, product ads also have dulled our analytic acuity. Unaccustomed to questioning the relationship between the gleeful kids or the sexy model and the products they tout, we docilely draw the inference that the actors appearing in the soft-filtered nostalgia of a reconstructed town are smiling not at the thought of the residuals they will earn but because Ronald Reagan has “brought America back.” So pervasive is this associative logic that no outcry emerged when a still at the end of one set of 1984 ads showed a picture of Ronald Reagan actually wrapped in a flag.

Television did not single-handedly evict eloquence from the assembly and tie it to the railroad track. A number of accomplices polished the tracks, purchased the rope, and then condemned the train for being punctual.
Decline in the Occasions that Nurture Speakers

Every major rhetorical theorist has noted the important role practice plays in perfecting the reflexes of a speaker. Yet ours is an age in which occasions calling for speechmaking rapidly are going the way of the dinosaur. The decline in the number of civic occasions on which an aspiring speaker can practice is paralleled by the decline of public speaking in the classroom.

Many students can now enter high school and eight years later exit from college without ever having had to deliver a formal public speech. If a requirement that students take a course in speech has survived, it can often be met with classes such as “Interpersonal Communication” or “Group Discussion” that require no public speaking. The number of universities requiring a speech course declined in the 1960s. Competitive contest speaking also has declined as has university support for intercollegiate debate. Where previously colleges used oral exams to test students’ mastery of individual subjects, written exams and term papers are now the rule. On many campuses and high schools, the valedictorian and salutatorian no longer deliver addresses at commencement. What this means in practical terms is that those who aspire to speak well have few ready-made occasions in which to test their talents.

The American colonists brought with them a sense of the importance of public address. The Boston Massacre was yearly commemorated with speeches on the meaning and misfortune of that act, speeches that fueled the revolution. In 1783, the city of Boston declared that the Boston Massacre address would thereafter be replaced by commemoration of Independence Day. On this day, an orator would deliver a public address “in which the Orator shall consider the feelings, manners and principles which led to this great National Event as well as the important and happy effects whether general or domestic which already have and will forever continue to flow from the Auspicious Epoch.”12 These speeches revivified the principles for which the country had fought and on which it was founded.

The Fourth of July address survived in towns and cities into the 1960s when the Vietnam war undercut the common values on which it was predicated. No longer could the country’s mission be defended without causing division. No longer could patriotism, the justness of the causes for which we fought, and the glories of past wars be rehearsed without underscoring schisms within the community. Unable to build from commonly shared premises, the speech was widely abandoned.

With it went a forum that from the country’s first murmurings of
nationhood had nurtured its young orators. Traditionally, the town's best speakers were those called on to speak on the Fourth of July. The occasion set role models of rhetorical excellence and gave those who aspired to the public life the chance to learn by doing.

Other such forums disappeared as well. Throughout the nineteenth century, communities routinely gathered to commemorate the anniversaries of the deaths of famous statesmen. So the deaths of the founders were commemorated at regular intervals. That form of address disappeared with our sense that we walk among great persons. Anniversaries also were commemorated. The beginning and completion of the Bunker Hill monument prompted speeches, for example, as did the second centennial of the landing of the Pilgrims. Nothing comparable to the Lyceum and the Chautauqua platforms survives either. The after-dinner speech has all but disappeared. Even the number of Jefferson-Jackson day dinners, with their complement of political speeches, has declined.

History tells us that a suitable education and adequate practice will facilitate the production of eloquence. At the moment, neither is easily attained in the United States. With the loss of occasions requiring speech, the aspiring speaker's ability to polish individual skills is minimized. The likelihood that one would have something to say if the occasion arose is also undercut by an educational system that, at every turn, defies the recommendations of the past.

**Eloquence and an Education in the Liberal Arts**

The importance of training in rhetoric was heightened by the fact that the Greek citizen was expected to be able to speak in public in the exercise of citizenship. The presumption that the citizen would be a citizen-orator is reflected in the use of the word rhetor, orator, to designate the politician. In the Greek city-state all male citizens were presumed to be able to speak on their own behalf in the law courts, the assembly, and on ceremonial occasions. About 390 B.C., Isocrates, whom Cicero regarded as the father of eloquence, founded a school in which “speaking or writing on large political topics was inculcated as a practical training for the active duties of a citizen.”\(^\text{15}\) In both Greek and Roman education, training in rhetoric played a pivotal role. The centrality of rhetoric in the curriculum persisted into the Middle Ages where, with grammar and dialectic, rhetoric formed the Trivium.

In classical times, training in rhetoric was part of educating the whole person. So in his oration for A. Licinus Archias, Cicero confesses to the
judges that at no time in his life has he been averse to the study of the best of the liberal arts since an understanding of the science (ratio) of speaking begins with them. Later, in the same address, he expresses his conviction that all the arts related to culture (humanitatem) have a common bond and are interrelated.

The program of learning outlined by Quintilian in the Institutes of Oratory included the study of philosophy, logic, history, religion, law, and oratory. Its goal was education of the orator-statesman-philosopher, the citizen-orator, the "good man speaking well." The ideal persevered. In the seventeenth century Rene Rapin identified poetry, history, philosophy, and eloquence as a vehicle capable of educating the whole person. The ideal gained expression on American soil with the founding of Harvard. In 1643 the college publicized the graduation of its first class, an event that occurred when nine men had completed their schooling the year before. The publicity about the class and curriculum, which took the form of a work titled New England's First Fruits, was published in London.

From it, we learn that the first criterion for admission to Harvard required that a student be able to speak Latin, decline nouns and verbs in Greek, and demonstrate an understanding of "Tullius (Cicero) or such like classical Latin author extempore." In addition to reading Scripture, the curriculum called for study of logic, physics, ethics, politics, Greek, etymology, syntax, prosodia, dialects, poesy, style, composition, imitation, epitome, Hebrew, grammar, and rhetoric. The précis notes that "every scholar may declaim once a month."  

By contrast, a 1984 report on undergraduate education in the United States found that "most of our college graduates . . . remained short-changed in the humanities—history, literature, philosophy, and the ideals and practices of the past that have shaped the society they enter."

A student can earn a B.A. "from 75 percent of all American colleges and universities without having studied European history; from 72 percent without having studied American literature or history; and from 86 percent without having studied the civilizations of classical Greece and Rome."  

At the high school level, research for the National Commission on Excellence in Education found that, from 1969 to 1981, credits in Western civilization declined 50 percent, in U.S. history, 20 percent, and in U.S. government, 70 percent. A 1987 study funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities documented the presumed results: "[M]ore than two-thirds of the nation’s seventeen-year-olds are unable to locate the Civil War within the correct half-century. More than two-thirds cannot identify the Reformation or Magna Carta.
By vast majorities, students demonstrate unfamiliarity with writers whose works are regarded as classics: Dante, Chaucer, Dostoevsky, Austen, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and Cather.¹⁷

The philosophy of education championed by Cicero, Quintilian, and Rapin produced students knowledgeable about their country’s history and traditions. It exposed them to the ideas and practices that constituted their culture. In the process, it made it possible for speakers to assume that they and their audiences shared a body of knowledge. In short, it facilitated the creation of enthymemes.

In his treatise on Rhetoric, Aristotle had termed the enthymeme the soul of persuasion. A speaker creates an enthymeme by suppressing premises in an argument on the assumption that the audience will invest the argument with them. Enthymemes gain their power from their reliance on unexpressed beliefs and information. As the amount of shared cultural information—history, literature, mythology, theology, philosophy, common experience—decreases, so too does the speaker’s ability to construct enthymemes. By stripping enthymemes of their ability to rely on unstated premises, the increasing specialization of education in the United States limits the ability of a political speaker to persuade the body politic. Specialized vocabularies shrink the means of persuasion available to a speaker required to find a language capable of bridging disciplines.

At the same time, dismissing philosophy from the educational core separated rhetoric from a companion who had been faithful since their births in Athens. Although many would dispute Plato’s belief that philosophy would teach the true, the good, and the just, few doubt that the study of philosophy engenders habits of thought and an understanding of the nature of evidence useful in the construction of arguments.

Meanwhile, although signs of a resurgence are on the horizon, the study of foreign languages declined. The Modern Language Association notes that in 1983 only 14 percent of all colleges and universities in the United States listed some foreign language as a requirement for admission. Where in 1966, 89 percent of all institutions required some foreign language study for the B.A. degree, in 1983 that percentage had dropped to 47.¹⁸

The 1987 NEH report American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation’s Public Schools saw a hopeful turnaround, however. Some states are now requiring that their school districts offer foreign language instruction from kindergarten through high school. And nationwide the percent of high school students enrolled in a foreign language has increased since 1978.¹⁹
The study of a foreign language helps students appreciate and communicate with those from other cultures, the standard justifications for such learning. But it also provides the advantage Cicero saw in translation. Translating refines the translator's understanding of and facility in the native tongue.

In the Roman model, the study of poetry preceded the study of rhetoric. Virgil set the stage for Cicero. "The object of the poetry was to develop the linguistic sense, impart general culture, quicken the imagination, and especially to enlarge the vocabulary," notes Shorey. Literary critic Northrop Frye agrees that the study of poetry contributes to a "good prose style in both speech and writing." "[T]here is the sense of wit and heightened intelligence, resulting from seeing disciplined words marching along in metrical patterns and in their inevitably right order," Frye adds. "And there is the sense of concreteness that we can get only from the poet's use of metaphor, and of visualized imagery. Literary education of this kind, its rhythm and leisure slowly soaking into the body and its wit and concreteness into the mind, can do something to develop a speaking and writing prose style that comes out of the depths of personality and is a genuine expression of it." These values were lost as the study of literature and poetry waned.

Although tying effect to cause is risky, if the great speakers are correct that the study of poetry and of other languages refines verbal facility, then the erosion of both should carry with it a decline in verbal skill. That decline has occurred. Between 1964 and 1982 the performance of students on eleven of the fifteen major Subject Area Tests of the Graduate Record Exam declined; the steepest declines were registered in subjects requiring high verbal skills.

In addition to studying history, philosophy, literature, and language, the well-educated students of the past also studied great speeches, an activity that expanded their awareness of the available means of persuasion and helped them ingest models of excellence. The value of these activities is confirmed in Lucian's ridicule of them in his satire on public speaking where he urges his pupil to avoid the speeches of "that twaddling Isocrates or that uncouth Demosthenes" and to scorn those who display "dead men of a bygone age to serve as patterns, and [expect] you to dig up long-buried speeches as if they were something tremendously helpful."

Lucian's advice runs counter to the practice of the eloquent speakers of the past. Cicero studied the speeches of the Greek masters, particularly Demosthenes. The elder William Pitt (Lord Chatham) "wrote out again and again carefully-prepared translations of some of the great models of ancient oratory, and . . . in this way he acquired his easy
command of a forcible and expressive style.” The younger Pitt, the second son of Lord Chatham, memorized the finest passages from Shakespeare, studied the writings of Bolingbroke, and translated Greek and Latin works. Edmund Burke read the orators of antiquity as well as the speeches and writings of Bolingbroke. As a young man, Lincoln studied excerpts from Cicero, Demosthenes, and the Earl of Chatham as well as the speeches of Hamlet, Falstaff, and Henry V. His speeches provide ample evidence of familiarity with the Bible and with the speeches of Webster, Calhoun, and Clay. Winston Churchill studied Chatham’s speeches. Like the students of his day, he also memorized passages for declaiming. In 1953, five days after his stroke, he recited an 86-line poem for his physician to prove that his memory was unaffected.

In addition to ingesting speeches, students studied the principles of rhetoric. “[T]he qualities, good and bad, of Lysias, Isocrates, and the other Attic orators, were analyzed, classified, and technically named by the contemporaries of Demosthenes and still more by those later Greek schools of rhetoric which taught, imitated, and commented on his orations for seven hundred years,” recalled classical scholar Paul Shorey. “This together with the Philosofic rhetoric that began with Plato, which was carried on by Aristotle and the Stoics, and was more or less blended with the other in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian, constitutes a huge body of rhetorical theory and criticism.” Now that body of knowledge, studied for seven centuries by all educated ancients, re-examined by most of those educated in the Renaissance, “is forgotten by all but specialists.” The loss is unfortunate for, as Shorey concludes, “if we are to study and analyze oratorical expression and prose style at all, there is much both in its substance and its terminology that would save us from intellectual confusion and futile logomachy.”

The broad-based education recommended by Cicero and Quintilian not only increased the available means of persuasion, fine-tuned the reasoning powers, and refined the use of one’s native tongue but also created what British theorist and practitioner Henry Brougham in his Dissertation on the Eloquence of the Ancients called “a delicate sense of rhetorical excellence.” This audience listened not merely to weigh deliberative matters but also “to enjoy a critical repast.” What the audience expected was a well-wrought, artistically satisfying, moving oration. There are speeches of Demosthenes, observes Macaulay in the History, that are so perfect that to alter a word is to change the speech for the worse.

Today, television’s tendency to reduce the speech to the thirty-five-second clip has accustomed us to the notion that we should be satisfied with a few moving passages; in ancient Greece the discourse was judged
as a whole and critiqued by the high standards and with the discerning

tastes of a rhetorically literate audience.

By training speakers to choose the best from among the available
means of persuasion, classical education also enabled listeners to detect
“sophistry.” The student familiar with history, literature, and the law
knew they were being misappropriated. The student who knew
how to appeal to an audience also was empowered to unmask inap-
propriate appeals. In addition to teaching about the enthymeme and ex-
ample, Aristotle’s Rhetoric treated fallacies. A task of contemporary ed-
ucation in rhetoric, too seldom accomplished, is creating “in every
audience a resisting minority that cannot be stampeded by plausible
sophistry and emotional volubility.”34 Instead of training audiences in
“the habits of logical analysis and suspense of judgment that would
enable [them] to resist . . . hypnotization,” we too often are interested
“in the ‘psychology’ of ‘putting it over’ and ‘getting it across.’” That
focus is reflected in the titles of best selling texts that promise to teach
the purchaser to win friends, influence people, sell, or persuade.

In the process of trying to allay the student’s fear of public speaking,
texts promising that speaking is “easy” have also done the art of rhet-
oric a disservice.

Eloquence and the Cultivation of the Art of Memory

The oral nature of Greek and Roman society resulted in the cultivation
of an appreciation for the artfully wrought speech, the subtle argu-
ment, the telling phrase, the suitable word. Audiences relished oral
communication. The masterful speech was an art form to be appreci-
ated as an aesthetic work as well as an applied appeal.

Where orality is central so too will be the art of memory. Although
he did not treat it in detail, Aristotle considered memory to be one of
the canons of rhetoric, along with the invention of arguments, arrange-
ment, style, and delivery. From the fifth century B.C., theorists and
practitioners were concerned with aiding the orator’s ability both to
recall ideas in their appropriate order and to retrieve the arguments of
preceding speeches for rebuttal. “What can I say of that repository for
all things, the memory, which, unless it be the keeper of the matter
and words that are the fruits of thought and invention, all the talents
of the orator, we see, though they be of the highest degree of excel-
ence, will be of no avail?” Cicero asked in De Oratore.35

In answer, he recalls the story of Simonides who in the middle of a
party was called outside to speak with two youths. During his absence,
the building collapsed, killing his companions. Their bodies were crushed
beyond recognition. By recalling where each had been standing, Simonides was able to identify the remains for proper burial. This led him to discover, says Cicero, that “it is chiefly order that gives distinctness to memory; and that by those, therefore, who would improve this part of the understanding, certain places must be fixed upon, and that of the things which they desire to keep in memory, symbols must be conceived in the mind, and ranged, as it were, in those places; thus the order of places would preserve the order of things, and the symbols of the things would denote the things themselves; so that we should use the places as waxen tablets, and the symbols as letters.”

In the Rhetorica ad Herennium, written around 85 B.C., memory receives careful treatment. That work, for centuries misattributed to Cicero, instructs students in the placement of images against a familiar background, usually a physical place the student is familiar with. Each image stands for an idea in the speech. These image-ideas are organized in the background in the order in which they will be delivered. Memory also receives treatment in Quintilian. By the eighteenth century the canon had all but disappeared from the rhetoric texts, a fact that led to its identification as the “lost canon.”

The great orators, those ready to respond appropriately to an opponent on any important matter of state, have, by whatever means, cultivated a retentive memory. Wendell Phillips “would listen to an elaborate speech for hours, and, without a single note of what had been said, in writing, reply to every part of it as fully and completely as if the speech were written out before him.” By contrast, poor orators too often find themselves in the position of an opponent of Cicero’s, previewing three points, developing four, and midway through the exposition losing their lines of thought. But unlike that speaker, few would have the nerve to argue that the amnesia had been induced by the witchcraft and sorcery of the opponent! Instead, our inability to sustain an extemporaneous line of argument should be blamed on lack of training.

In his closing statement at the second Reagan-Mondale debate of 1984, Reagan demonstrated the perils in losing one’s train of thought. After taking the audience on a trip down a California highway, Reagan meditated on the message one should leave future generations. Had the rambling narrative occurred before Reagan’s deft dismissal of the so-called age issue, its lack of coherence would have magnified public concerns about his command of the presidency. So entangled did Reagan get in his tangent that by the time he regrasped the thread of his thought, his time was up:
Several years ago, I was given an assignment to write a letter. It was to go into a time capsule and would be read in 100 years when that time capsule was opened. I remember driving down the California coast one day, my mind was full of what I was going to put into that letter about the problems and issues that confront us in our time and what we did about them.

But I couldn't completely neglect the beauty around me, the Pacific out there on one side, the highway shining on the other side. And I found myself wondering what it would be like for someone, wondering if someone 100 years from now would be driving down that highway and if they would see the same thing.

And, with that thought I realized what a job I had with that letter. I would be writing a letter to people who know everything there is to know about us. We know nothing about them. They would know all about our problems, they would know how we solved them and whether our solution was beneficial to them down through the years or whether it hurt them.

They would also know they live in a world with terrible weapons, nuclear weapons, terrible destructive power aimed at each other, capable of crossing the ocean in a matter of minutes and destroying civilization as we knew it.

And then, I thought to myself, what, what are they going to say about us? What are those people 100 years from now going to think? They will know whether we used those weapons or not.

Well, what they will say about us 100 years from now depends on how we keep our rendezvous with destiny. Will we do the things that we know must be done and know that one day down in history 100 years or perhaps before, someone will say, thank God for those people back in the 1980s for preserving our freedom? For saving for us this blessed planet called Earth with all its grandeur and its beauty.

You know, I'm grateful to all of you for giving me the opportunity to serve you for these four years, and I seek reelection because I want more than anything else to try to complete the new beginning that we charted four years ago.

George Bush, who I think is one of the finest vice presidents this country has ever had, George Bush and I have crisscrossed the country and we've had in these last few months a wonderful experience. We have met young America. We have met your sons and daughters.

Newman (moderator): Mr. President, I am obliged to cut you off there under the rules of the debate. I'm sorry.

Apart from the training that enables musicians to commit scores of scores to memory, little in contemporary education cultivates memory. Formerly, tradition was perpetuated and memory polished by an educational system that insisted that students commit to memory sections of great plays, passages from great pieces of literature, great poems,
and eloquent orations. I remember surprise when my grandmother an-
swered a question I had about Daniel Webster by reciting a long pas-
sage from his Bunker Hill oration, an address she had memorized in
high school. She also could recite Washington’s farewell address and
the Gettysburg Address, the preamble to the Constitution, and a large
portion of the Declaration of Independence. Her husband courted her,
she recalled, by reciting “by heart” great love poetry. The dissimilar
metaphors embedded in “I learned it by heart” and “I learned it by
rote” reflect antithetical views of the nature and value of committing
materials to memory.

The Resources Provided by Memory and Knowledge

When the material committed to memory was of value, the educational
idealization of ars memoriae enabled the speaker to draw on an individ-
ual repertoire of knowledge to argue a claim. We see that facility used
dexterously by the great orators. Demosthenes reportedly transcribed
the history of Thucydides six times38 and drew comfortably on it and
on the classic poets; Cicero notes that Lysias and Critias gained their
elegance from imitation of “the vigorous style of Pericles”39 and him-
self drew on the speeches of Demosthenes. Lincoln mines the Bible
with a sure hand; indeed one of his most famous claims is taken di-
rectly from it: “A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand.” Edmund
Burke uses Cicero as one would draw on the wisdom of an old
friend.

We know that Burke’s recollections of passages from the past are
being summoned from memory because the quotations are often par-
aphrases. So, for example, he notes in a reissue of his Reflections on the
Revolution in France that Aristotle’s observation that a democracy has
striking resemblance with a tyranny had been “quoted from memory.”
But he adds, “after many years had elapsed from my reading the pas-
sage.” Subsequently, “A learned friend has found it, and it is as fol-
ows.”40 In the same work we see Burke slightly modifying a passage
from Cicero, again because he is recalling it from memory.41

Commanding the classics is not an empty phrase when used to de-
scribe such speakers, for they could summon the masterpieces of the
past and bid them speak on their behalf. Having such capacity at one’s
disposal gave the orator access not only to the wisdom and authority of
the past but also to models of style. By making the words their own,
orators began the process of assimilating a sense of style, an ear for
language effectively used. Persons “of quick intellect and glowing tem-
perament find it easier to become eloquent by reading and listening to
eloquent speakers than by following rules for eloquence,” noted Augustine, the rhetoric professor turned bishop.\textsuperscript{42}

Once committed to memory, the masterpieces were presented orally, a practice that polished delivery. This ability was so valued that Archias’ recitation of “a great number of excellent verses” pertinent to a matter under discussion is cited by Cicero as grounds for granting him his citizenship.\textsuperscript{43}

A sense of the value of such ability persisted. Milton recommended that pupils read “the choice Histories, Heroic Poems, and Attic Tragedies of statelyst and most regal argument, with all the famous Political Orations.” Some should be memorized, he added, and “solemnly pronounced with right accent, and grace, as might be taught, would endue them even with the spirit and vigor of Demosthenes or Cicero, Euripides, or Sophocles.”\textsuperscript{44}

Through the centuries, theorists have believed that listening to the delivery of eloquence disposed one to eloquence. Accordingly, in one of the speeches delivered as part of his education at Harvard in the mid-seventeenth century, Michael Wigglesworth said that “after the hearing of a well-composed speech, lively expressed, the understanding of the auditor is so framed into the mould of eloquence, that he could almost go away and compose the like himself, either upon the same or another subject. And what’s the reason of this? Why, his mind is transported with a kind of rapture, and inspired with a certain oratoric fury, as if the orator together with his words had breathed his soul and spirit into those that hear him.”\textsuperscript{45}

The great teachers of rhetoric went beyond mere memorization and recitation to help students see the strengths and weaknesses of the models they were studying. So, although he recommends copying that “which has been invented with success” so that the student could make what is excellent in each speaker “his own,” Quintilian wanted his students to add excellence of their own to compensate for the deficiencies of their models so that the students would surpass those who preceded them and would be able to instruct those who followed.\textsuperscript{46} That model was perpetuated by John Ward who published System of Oratory in 1759.\textsuperscript{47} In his system, students enlarged on the expression of a masterpiece, drew from parts of a masterpiece as Cicero in his speeches against Mark Anthony drew on Demosthenes against Philip of Macedon, retained the idea but applied it to a new subject, or altered the order of the original thoughts. Ward defends this method by noting that those we recognize as masters imitated and expanded on the master works of their predecessors as Virgil imitated Homer and Terence, Menander.
Speech as Thought vs. The Speech as Text

Plato forecast problems should the written word become the means of conserving information. Because writing discourages memory, reliance on it would drain the vitality from speech. For Plato, forgetfulness draws us from the true, the good, and the just and is as a result harmful.48 Telling the story of the invention of writing by the Egyptian God, Theuth, Plato observes that writing prompted students to trust the writing rather than themselves.

When Theuth offered the Egyptian king writing, the ruler replied: "If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls: they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks; what you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance; for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing; and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows."

Writing is freighted with other problems. Once a speech is reduced to writing it loses its ability to respond, to speak. So Socrates remarks that written words "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever." Plato illustrates this claim when Phaedrus presents a written speech by Lysias and then proves unable to defend it.

In one sense contemporary classicist George Kennedy is correct when he suggests that "The relative importance of the spoken as contrasted with the written word steadily decreased until the twentieth century, when the process began to be reversed by radio and television."49 The broadcast media increased the amount of information that we receive through an oral channel, displacing the newspaper as our prime means of political information gathering. But in another sense, Kennedy's claim requires qualification, for much of what appears on television is the oral delivery of the printed word. The sitcoms, dramas, and commercials that predominate in prime-time programming are all scripted as are the words that the network anchors speak on the evening news. The political speeches excerpted for evening news are, in the main, delivered from scripts as are the televised speeches of the president to the nation and the Congress. As those who learned to spell "antidises-
tablishmentarianism” by watching “The $64,000 Question” were shocked to learn, for a time the game shows were scripted as well.

With the speech as text came the speechwriter as unseen and unannounced author. Speaking could now be divorced from the act of thinking, and feeling from the act of speaking. No longer was the speaker required to be a thinker, only an artful reader. With the sundering of thinking from speaking came problems I will address in a later chapter.

In many ways we are a less oral age than those periods prior to Gutenberg. Because television is an audiovisual, not a print medium, and since the question “Why Can’t Johnny Read?” is one that plagues us, this claim at first may seem surprising. But where the ancient orators rarely read an entire speech to an audience, today’s TelePrompTer-bred American politicians routinely do.

Striking testimony of the textbound nature of modern politics can be found in the gaffes of Ronald Reagan. The meaning that he is communicating on formal occasions resides not in his memory but in the text crawling before his eyes on the prompter or enshrined on cards before him. This bondage to the printed word entrapped him in his acceptance speech at the convention in 1984, in his second inaugural, and in his welcome to the Pope in fall 1987. In his acceptance speech the president did not see the period separating two lines. As a result he indicted his own administration instead of that of Carter-Mondale.

The second inaugural suffered when at the last minute the speech was moved from outdoors, where it would have been delivered with the help of the prompter, to indoors where it was delivered from cards. Apparently unable to read the cards clearly, Reagan seemed momentarily to commit the nation to filling the world with beaches, a welcome thought to those suffering subzero weather but hardly the sort of action likely to help balance the budget. Reagan said: “For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old. We raise our voices to the God who is the author of this most tender music.” And may “He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sand, sound—in unity, affection and love.”

The divorce between knowledgeable thought and the speech act was demonstrated anew when Reagan mangled the name of noted philosopher Jacques Maritain in his speech welcoming the Pope (September 10, 1987). By citing “Ma Rec Ten,” Reagan seemed to posit a new nationality for the Frenchman and at the same time revealed his own ignorance of the philosophy to which he was paying tribute and his unfamiliarity with the text from which he was reading.

The command of the classics, the cultivation of a private mental li-
brary, is reflected in the practice current from ancient Greece through nineteenth-century America of backing or illustrating one's claims with quotations from or allusions to the classics, poetry, or revered religious sources. Accordingly, William Jennings Bryan advised orators that "classical allusions ornament a speech, their value being greater of course when addressed to those who are familiar with their sources. Poetry can often be used to advantage, especially when the sentiment is appropriate and is set forth in graceful language. By far the most useful quotations for an orator, however, are those from Holy Writ. The people are more familiar with the Bible than with any other single book, and lessons drawn from it reinforce a speech."  

As educational institutions turned from required reading of such sources; as memorization, imitation, and recitation gave way to a focus on the present and on original composition; speakers lost the ability to summon the past to their purposes. When the past masters were cited, parenthetical information was included to situate them in a time and place lest the audience misunderstand or stare uncomprehendingly. When so little past information resides in the audience that a brief history lesson must be appended to any allusion, the skillful speaker recognizes a digression in the making and a didactic tone in the offering and abandons the reference.

We can hear the speakers' confidence in their audiences' command of the past slipping away in speeches by John Hamilton (Lord Belhaven) in the eighteenth century, Daniel Webster in the nineteenth, and Edward R. Murrow in the twentieth. Hamilton was comfortable with the assumption that his audience knew who Hannibal was, what he had done, and what relevance those actions had to the Scottish Parliament when in November 1706 he pleaded:

Hannibal, my Lord, is at our gates—Hannibal is come within our gates—Hannibal is come the length of this table—he is at the foot of the throne. He will demolish the throne if we take not notice. He will seize upon these regalia. He will take them as our spolia opima, and whip us out of this House, never to return again.  

By contrast, the peroration of his speech in the Dartmouth College case reveals that Daniel Webster feels the need to ensure that his audience is familiar with some of the particulars of Caesar's death before analogizing present to past. Unlike Hamilton, Webster assumes that the audience requires that Latin be translated, as well.

It is, sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet there are those who love it.

Sir, I know not how others may feel but for myself, when I see my Alma
Mater surrounded, like Caesar in the Senate house, by those who are re-
iterating stab after stab, I would not, for this right hand, have her turn to
me and say, *Et tu quoque, mi fili!* And thou too, my son!^32

Where familiarity with the major works of Shakespeare once could
be comfortably assumed, Edward R. Murrow felt it necessary, in his
televised attack on Joseph McCarthy in March 1954, to identify Shakes-
ppeare’s *Julius Caesar* as the source of his closing statement about the
Senator. “See It Now” showed McCarthy addressing the Secretary of
the Army with the question, “Upon what meat does this our Caesar
feed?” Murrow rephrased the line to preview his analysis of McCarthy,
“And upon what meat does Senator McCarthy feed?” His answer: “the
investigations, protected by immunity, and the half-truth...” In clos-
ing, Murrow noted, “Had he looked three lines earlier in Shakespeare’s
*Caesar*, he would have found this line, which is not altogether inap-
propriate: ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.’”^53

Now a speaker risks blank stares by assuming audience familiarity
with Shakespeare, the stories of Cain and Abel, the strategies or impor-
tance of Trafalgar, Tripoli, or Dien Bien Phu or the memorable phrases
of Demosthenes, Burke, Jefferson, or Churchill. Such collective amne-
sia means that one can safely bet that most will be unable to account
for the effect of General Garfield’s words to a mob assembling in New
York in City Park Hall on the night of Lincoln’s assassination. Al-
though the mob was inclined to storm an anti-Lincoln newspaper, Gar-
field calmed it by proclaiming:

> “Clouds and darkness are round about him;
> Righteousness and judgment are the habitations of his throne”
> Fellow citizens, God reigns and the government at Washington still
> lives!

The crowd dispersed. Psalms 97:2 had a power then that it now lacks.
To a contemporary audience, the statement speaks only its literal
meaning, a meaning inadequate to account for the reported effect.^54

The central claims of Madison Avenue, of prime-time television, and
of widely viewed films have replaced those of the Bible, Shakespeare,
and the great speeches as the *lingua franca* of contemporary oratory.
John Kennedy showed awareness of the change when he said that “he
was reading more now but enjoying it less,” a rephrasing of a cigarette
ad’s slogan. Similarly, the slogan of a hamburger chain, “Where’s the
beef?” became a pivotal political question in the 1984 primaries. In
Spring 1985, Reagan answered a press conference question with the Clint
Eastwood phrase “Make my day.” And in summer 1987 Oliver North
certified his desire to be candid with the Select Committee of the Sen-
ate and House and with the American people by averring, in the words of another Eastwood film, that he was committed to revealing "the good, the bad and the ugly." Reporters who share the culture from which the statement is drawn did not need to ask for a clarifying context.

Neither the delivery nor the study of speeches is a routine part of education anymore. Dismissed in the classroom, devalued by the media, divorced from the disciplines that develop the habits of mind that are its mainstay, eloquence is orphaned. But the prospects for eloquence are not as bleak as they were a decade ago. Although those calling for a return to the study of the liberal arts and a reemphasis on foreign language skill seem unaware of it, their proposed course of study would prepare students to appreciate and perhaps produce eloquence.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government is exporting a commodity that is scarce at home. Where Quintilian idealized the "good man speaking well," intelligence agents envision the "good guerrilla." In the early 1980s, a CIA manual enjoining the Contras to make both rhetoric and war was distributed by U.S. operatives in Nicaragua. Titled Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare, the guidebook enunciated "many of the literary devices in frequent use in oratory." "We recommend," said the pseudonymous Tayacan, "that those interested use them in moderation, since an orator who overuses literary devices loses credibility."

In addition to guns and butter, the United States has supplied the Contras with apostrophe, paralipsis, litotes, and interrogation. Tayacan wrote:

*Apostrophe* consists of addressing something supernatural or inanimate as if it were a living being. For example, "Mountains of Nicaragua, make the seed of freedom grow."

*Paralipsis* involves the pretense of discretion. For example, "If I were not obligated to keep military secrets, I would tell you about all the armaments we have, so you would feel even more confident that our victory is assured."

*Litotes* is a way of conveying a lot by saying little. For example, "The nine commanders haven't stolen much, just the whole country."

*Interrogation* consists of asking a question of oneself. For example, "if they have already murdered the members of my family, my friends, my peasant brothers, do I have any path other than brandishing a weapon?"

A century or so from now, when archeologists uncover a moldering copy of Tayacan's treatise amid the signs of a military camp on a Nicaraguan hillside, they may marvel at a guerrilla movement that apparently taught its illiterate followers to read by illustrating the classical Roman figures of speech with propagandistic claims about its cause.