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‘Elegant, concise and frequently very funny’ Spectator

‘Entertaining … You finish this book more than ready to rock a first in rhetoric.’ Evening Standard

‘Erudite loopiness of the highest order … sure to enlighten’ Financial Times

‘Illuminating … Leith helps his readers to deploy rhetoric and, no less importantly, to recognize when they are in danger of falling victim to it.’ TLS

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‘Displays a formidable degree of intellectual chutzpah … rhetoric is not a dusty topic for young and old fogeys. It determines how we live now.’ Scotland on Sunday
‘Leaves the reader entertained and enlightened’ The Week

‘Highly entertaining … written with such charm and persuasion … if you like words and enjoy language you will love this book.’ Avanti! Magazine

‘A sprightly, erudite and often very funny book about rhetoric … also an exceptionally astute examination of how politics works. I relished every page of it.’ Literary Review

‘Entertaining and accessible look at the history of political rhetoric … with illuminating pitstops at the likes of Churchill.’ Belfast Telegraph

‘Delightful and illuminating … You Talkin’ to Me? isn’t a how-to book, but chances are anyone who reads it will acquire a trick or two.’ Salon
YOU TALKIN’ TO ME?

SAM LEITH is the literary editor of *The Spectator* and writes the ‘Art of Persuasion’ column for the *Financial Times*, as well as being a regular contributor to the *Guardian*, *Telegraph* and *TLS* among others. He is the author of three other books of non-fiction (*Dead Pets*, *Sod’s Law* and *Write To The Point*) and a novel, *The Coincidence Engine*. 
YOU TALKIN’ TO ME?

*Rhetoric from Aristotle to Trump*

SAM LEITH
For Mum

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and updated in 2019

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I FIRST SAT DOWN to write the book that became You Talkin’ To Me? in 2009. The forty-fourth president of the United States of America – whose oratory had inspired the book – was just settling into the White House. The book seemed pretty up-to-date. My notion in writing it had been to take a sweeping look at the history of rhetoric – its theorists and its practitioners from long before the birth of Christ to shortly after the 2008 election.

In doing so I hoped to demonstrate that, at root, not much about oratory and persuasive writing had changed – not on a fundamental level: public men and women still wrote and delivered speeches, and the way those speeches worked on their audiences’ sense of self, their emotions and their reasoning, would have been entirely recognisable to Aristotle.

I stand by that. But in certain respects, things have moved on. And what’s more, they have moved on pretty fast. Look in the index of the original book, and you find not a single reference to Facebook or Twitter and only one to Google. Yet if you look at the world around you and the way it is shaped by digital media in general and social media in particular, you see a complete transformation. Grassroots
political movements flourish as never before thanks to social media – and even mainstream politicians now have to consider not only how their rhetorical sallies will be reported in the mainstream press and on television but how they will travel on social media.

It just so happens that 2009 was exactly the year in which Twitter’s rate of growth started to really shoot up; in 2008 it was growing at 750-odd per cent; in 2009, at twice that rate. Facebook started the turbo-charged phase of its ascent a little earlier, but still, if you compare its user base as 2007 dawned with its user base three years later, it’s a jump of multiples. As I write, Twitter boasts 320 million active users; Facebook, 2.27 billion. And this ignores Instagram, Tumblr, SnapChat, YouTube, and the countless other apps and services with which people now share information and through which data – aka our thoughts, our feelings, and our amusing Hitler-resembling pussycats – propagates.

Is all this, as you might ask, a game changer? I should say, though I am no oracle, yes and no. Yes, the advent of social media has changed, definitively and for good and all (at least until the next thing comes along), the way much rhetoric is done. But no, it has not changed one bit, not fundamentally, the way rhetoric works.

How do I make that distinction? It’s sometimes said that we’re out of sync: our technology is space-age, while our civilisations or institutions are medieval, and our emotions are still Stone Age. This is what we might call a suggestive oversimplification, but it points to something real. Anyone who’s watched the lumbering way in which western legal institutions attempt to play catch-up with technology can see the gap between the first and second of those propositions; anyone who’s seen the ageless reaction of a teenager being bullied – whether it be taunting on social media or the good-old analogue point-and-jeer method I remember
Preface: Rhetoric is Dead, Long Live Rhetoric

from the playground – will recognise the truth of the third proposition.

So the way rhetoric works through these different technologies adapts to the technologies, but the way it works on us – our fears and desires, our deep-seated tribal feelings – is pretty much the same as ever. It emphatically doesn’t mean rhetoric is on the way out. It means, rather, that it’s changing form. And that change is extremely interesting.

Through human history, every new art form or communicative technology – and rhetoric falls into both categories – has been greeted with a mixture of excitement and fear. Those fears tend to be substantially the same: that it will shorten our attention spans, erode our seriousness, hamper our ability to communicate, and/or undermine civil society. Socrates regarded the development of the written word as a bad thing: it would cause the arts of memory to fall into disrepair and with them the skill of thinking. People would imagine that because they had read something, they understood it: we would have everywhere knowledge and nowhere wisdom. (When I was growing up, similar anxieties attended the use of pocket calculators in maths classes.) We know Socrates thought this, incidentally, thanks to the miracle of the written word. So too, in various ways over the years, did cultural paranoia attend the development of silent reading, moveable type, and the distribution of the Bible in the vernacular.

When the novel first became popular as a form, it was widely regarded as a morally suspect and brain-rotting form of entertainment. Likewise, the theatre: in Jane Austen’s morally suspect, brain-rotting Mansfield Park, you know that certain of the characters are a bit scandalous because they’re keen on amateur theatricals. Now we regard novels and drama as mainstays of high culture, while television and videogames have taken their turns as the great villains of
the day. Play videogames all day, and you’ll lose the ability to communicate with other human beings. Watch television too much, and you’ll become stupid, just like David Foster Wallace.

So, in the age of the sound bite and the tweet, I’m occasionally asked, ‘Is rhetoric dead?’ I always answer, cheerily and with complete confidence, that it’s never been more vigorous. More people have platforms, those platforms reach further, and the sheer volume of text (and video) in the world – what you might think of as the rhetorical biomass – is greater than at any time in human history. Rhetoric is unkillable. It ceaselessly adapts to its audience and to its means of transmission.

Let me give an example or two. In the 1980s and 1990s, rolling television news started to change how politics was reported. As a cast-iron consequence, it also changed the way politics was done. Political aides started to think in terms of not the next day’s newspapers but the ‘news cycle’. And the ‘sound bite’ – a short phrase that would be quoted over and over again in those repeating news bulletins and would likely then also make the next day’s headlines – became a very important weapon in their armoury.

There was a lot of anxiety over ‘sound-bite culture’, some of it well justified. It did mean that, for a politician being braced on an issue of the day, a long, nuanced, and carefully argued answer was unlikely to have the impact of a well-turned phrase. And, of course, this hasn’t gone away – though it’s worth remembering that the well-turned and memorable phrase has always, always had a special life in rhetoric and oratory.

As the media landscape has become more and more disaggregated, as the internet – memorably described as ‘an ecosystem of interruption technologies’ – offers more and more by way of distraction and temptation, as quotation
from any given set of remarks is more and more likely to happen in a tweet or a short video or an image, small objects travel furthest.

But the orator still needs to be on his toes. In 2011, we saw a gloriously comic instance of why. A television reporter interviewed Ed Miliband, then leader of the Labour party, for his reaction to a public-sector dispute. Mr Miliband had a slightly tricky row to hoe: he owed his leadership of the Labour party to the very unions who were in dispute with the government, so he didn’t want to come out against them. At the same time, he knew that the strikes commanded very little public sympathy, and so much as he might have wanted to whack the government, he risked being keelhauled in the media as ‘Red Ed’ if he were to show support for the striking workers. So he hit on a formulation that took the middle path.

‘These strikes are wrong,’ he said with earnest conviction in answer to the reporter’s first question, ‘at a time when negotiations are still going on. But parents and the public have been let down by both sides, because the government has acted in a reckless and provocative manner. After today’s disruption I urge both sides to put aside the rhetoric, get round the negotiating table, and stop it happening again.’

He answered the following five questions, all of which addressed different issues, with an all but identical version of the same formulation, paying no regard whatever to the questions themselves. As the interviewer later remarked, he’d been sorely tempted, by the end of the interview, to ask, ‘What is the world’s fastest fish?’ ‘Can your dog do tricks?’ or ‘Which is your favorite dinosaur?’ to see if he could elicit a different answer.

So what on earth was going on there? The answer is that Miliband and his Mili-handlers had calculated – quite
reasonably, as it happened – that whatever he said would be whittled down to a ten-second quote for inclusion in a packaged news report at the top of the hour. By having him simply repeat a prepared sound bite, word for word, in answer to any question, they thought they could ensure that the broadcaster transmitted exactly what they wanted transmitted. No ‘gaffes’, no being drawn into saying something he shouldn’t, no dangerous off-topic digressions.

And that worked, as far as it went. That evening’s news will have used one of those answers. It’s clear that this interview was no more than an unusually stark and clunking version of something that has long been standard practice for politicians confronted with TV cameras. The rolling news stations need your ten-second sound bite, and if you only give them one, that’s the one they’ll have to use. Crude but effective. Had Miliband given that interview just a few years previously, it would have been a job well – if discourteously – done.

But he didn’t reckon on YouTube. Unexpurgated footage of the interview was posted online and soon went viral on social media. Miliband’s robotic repetitions, combined with his hammy attempts to seem serious and sincere, were so sublimely strange and funny that he became an instant laughing stock*. Here I am, still mocking him for it eight years later. And that footage will be online forever. So there: a CNN-age orator getting a Twitter-age comeuppance. Rhetoric is an arms race.

But was he the victim of ‘sound-bite culture’? Only up to a point. We think of the internet as necessitating ever-shorter communications, the 280 characters of a tweet being its paradigmatic new form. But the internet’s pull toward brevity did not do for Miliband – quite the opposite:

.................................

*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCem9EZb-YA
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a news network could never screen two-and-a-half-minutes of someone saying the same thing over and over again, but slapping that video up on YouTube costs nothing and is the work of a moment. While small objects travel furthest, in the vast space of the digital universe, there’s room for some very large ones too. In its early years, YouTube limited videos to ten minutes; in 2010, it upped the limit to fifteen minutes; now (with a verified account) you can post an Andy Warhol-esque eleven hours. Blog posts of positively eye-watering length and detail proliferate too – giving rise to the always useful acronym ‘TL;DR’ (‘Too long; didn’t read’).

This means that a rhetorical strategy online might involve using something very short and snappy, say, a tweet or a Facebook status update, to hook the audience and linking to something much longer and more detailed – just as, in the analogue world, a citation might lead to an article whose bibliography reveals a whole world of further reading or, perhaps, an eye-catching newspaper headline hints at the substance unpacked at length below. Your *exordium* – to stretch an analogy – might be 280 characters, while *narration, division* and *proof* might continue in your blog post. And prepare for some *refutation* in the below-the-line comments section or your @ replies. (All these and the other technical terms I use in this new preface are explained later in the book, by the way – but you might want to skip ahead to the glossary if they’re unfamiliar.)

What of Aristotle’s persuasive triad – ethos, pathos, and logos – in the digital age? Let’s start with the first among equals, the bedrock of all persuasion, ethos: a speaker’s appeal to his or her audience. In most cases through history, that has been a case of personal bona fides: Does the audience trust your integrity and expertise, know your history, share your desires? Does it like you?

For the last few centuries, with the advent of the joint
stock company and the blessed invention of the advertising industry, ethos has also been involved in corporate identities: here, we call it ‘branding’. When you see that your hamburger comes out of a wrapper bearing the Golden Arches or that the car in front of you is a Toyota, you’ll form an impression of the hamburger or the car based on its logo – and companies go to very great lengths to ensure that impression is a positive one.

Every action, as Isaac Newton told us, has an equal and opposite reaction. Anti-corporate campaigners have, over the last quarter century, become especially adept at using big brands’ visibility against them in what’s sometimes called culture jamming. So anti-tobacco campaigners, for instance, replaced Joe Camel with Joe Chemo, and billboard vandals turned ‘ESSO’ into ‘E$$O’. Sometimes the corporations even manage to subvert themselves: when the boss of a large British jewellery chain, Ratners, described his products as ‘total crap’ at a business conference, his remarks wiped £500 million pounds off the company’s market value. That was in 1991, when £500 million was a lot of money. The company came within a whisker of going bust.

Ethos is about trust. And when you go online – where anonymity and impersonation are very much easier and very much more common than in meatspace – trust is a major problem. The blockchain technology that underpins Bitcoin – a transparent, publicly available, and uncheatable cryptographic structure – is one ingenious approach, in one area, to solving that problem. It allows strangers to trust each other with money and, what’s more, to do so while remaining anonymous. When it comes to arguing online, however, as opposed to paying for goods and services, encryption technology won’t quite cover it. As has often been said, the internet gives a voice to millions who would not have had one. But it also makes it harder to sift the authoritative and
trustworthy from all those voices. How do people project an ethos appeal online?

Do you trust something you find on a random blog? Probably not. Do you trust something you read on Wikipedia? More likely so – because Wikipedia’s guidelines ensure that, though it’s possible to hoax visitors with an untested or outright false piece of information, the canny user knows to check material that lacks a proper citation. And hypertext lets you check those citations. You can trust an anonymous editor, in other words, because you can check his or her work – a weak, non-mathematical shadow of the blockchain.

Branding, both corporate and personal, still does a great deal of the work of ethos in the online environment. When someone who has kept the (standard default) egg avatar and appears to have three followers tweets something to your timeline, you will likely give it less weight than the tweet of a user followed by many people known to you. A few thousand followers or a few thousand ‘likes’ give users of social media more of an air of authority: those ‘likes’ are the earnest of a track record and a history – of one sort or another. Indeed, you could consider that, implicitly, a version of argumentum ad populum – an appeal to the wisdom of the crowd. The same thing applies to posts that go viral: if half a million people have shared something on social media, we tend to assume that it will be interesting – or funny, or offensive, or blessed with a particularly amusing picture of a cat that looks a bit like Hitler.

This idea about virality leads us to the second of Aristotle’s categories. It’s notable that pathos, the appeal to emotion, plays a very large part in this. When a few years ago I interviewed BuzzFeed’s founder, Jonah Peretti, he said that memes and web culture are ‘organised by a sort of social logic. What kind of things do people like to do together? What kinds of things do people relate to? We organise our site
by these emotional responses’ [my emphasis]. As Peretti con-

The things that go completely bananas online are almost always
the things that tap into the emotions: shock or curiosity
(‘WTF’), sentimentality (‘Squee!’), amusement (‘LOL’), and
– more than perhaps any of the previous – anger (‘Grrr’, to
borrow the analogue catchphrase).

Argumentum ad populum can be weaponised as an appeal
to the anger of the crowd. See the case of the ‘social media
pile-on’ or ‘Twitterstorm’ for details – for example the case
of Justine Sacco, the PR worker who in 2013 made a jocular
tweet widely interpreted as racist and said that the resul-
tant furore ‘ruined her life’. As a weapon of persuasion, the
online equivalent of George Orwell’s four-minute hate is a
blunt and unattractive instrument – but it works. All rheto-
ric, as I’m fond of saying, is at root identity speech, and
the internet is a space in which group identities are policed
aggressively. Transgressors against codes of behaviour can
be hounded in a way that was barely possible offline, and
with-us-or-against-us thinking is very common indeed.

Social media has been very important in the emergence
of angry movements against conventional politics – be they
the Occupy Movement or the Tea Party. In a widely anti-
authoritarian online environment, new types of authority
emerge – including, in a strange twist on the old notion of
trusting somebody because you know who they are, the rise
of the decentred activist group Anonymous. Anonymity,
here, is parlayed into a sort of rhetorical strength, a mark
of egolessness, austere virtue, and (by implication, at least)
membership of a numberless group of the like-minded.

And finally, what about logos, the name Aristotle gave
to actual argumentation? Can you still make a proper argu-
ment in the online world? Won’t you just be shouted down?
Isn’t it just a case of blurting a 280-character slogan and
Preface: Rhetoric is Dead, Long Live Rhetoric

hoping yours is the one that goes viral? Will anyone even listen on an internet that is an apparent cesspool of conspiracy theories, hoaxes, zombie facts, and malicious put-ons?

Actually, there’s decent reason to suppose you can, you won’t, it isn’t, and – if you get it right – they will. Many of the things that Aristotle talked about when discussing argument – the use of proofs and witnesses, the appeal to commonplaces, and the adducing of evidence – are easier rather than harder in the online age. With the digital equivalent of the Great Library of Alexandria at your fingertips – and the means not only to quote from but to link to it – your resources for serious argument are far greater than they were. Want to pull a living authority into your argument? You can always @ him or her on Twitter.

There are lots of shouty crazies out there – but the sane are out there too. The internet makes it easy to spread lies and conspiracy theories – the long-discredited anti-Semitic tsarist hoax The Protocols of the Elders of Zion continues to enjoy its radioactive half-life in the swampier parts of the World Wide Web – but it makes debunking them easy as well. A specialised form of refutation known as ‘fisking’ has flourished online. The term denotes a style of aggressively forensic line-by-line fact-checking named for veteran Middle Eastern correspondent Robert Fisk, who pioneered the technique in the sense (unfortunately for him) of incessantly being the victim of it.

So we have new communicative forms – the very long and the very short. The visual rather than the merely verbal is foregrounded – with the play of gifs and emoticons, the impact of photographs and diagrams. We have, you could say, new figures and commonplaces available – a reaction gif where once a well-worn apothegm would have served. But the old ones are still going strong: you’ll find chiasmus, alliteration, erotema, antithesis, anaphora, and tricolon all
flourishing on social media. We have new, complex, and often subtle forms of signalling tone and register online, new decorums and conventions indicating membership in one communicative clique or another. Our resources for quotation and fact-checking are as never before.

And – this is maybe the most exciting and complicating aspect of the digital age of all – our arguments now have a dizzying reach. Consider, after all, that in the notional Rhetoric Year One, the only audience imaginable consisted of people physically within earshot of a speaker. Now anyone with an internet connection has the potential to address the world. That means that a lot of people excluded from public life are excluded no longer.

So a development to which we can give a welcome, too – one which started in the twentieth century but has accelerated enormously in the last few years – has been the extent to which women’s voices are entering the public sphere and doing so to real effect.

As the classicist Mary Beard pointed out in her 2017 book *Women & Power: A Manifesto*, the exclusion of women’s voice from public spaces goes back three millennia. The first instance in the western canon of a man telling a woman to shut up comes in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Odysseus’s wife Penelope, still waiting in Ithaca for her husband’s return, comes downstairs to find a minstrel serenading the suitors who are cluttering the place up in the hopes of winning her hand. She asks him to play a different tune, and her son Telemachus interrupts her: ‘Mother, go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff … speech will be the business of men.’ And so it has been for most of the years between then and now.

Institutional and social change in the twentieth century – that women started to become heads of state, lawyers, senior academics and captains of industry – has done some
of the work of undoing that. But the social media age has accelerated the process considerably. In the years since I originally wrote *You Talkin’ To Me?* – in which I offered a slightly sheepish apology for the book being such a sausage-fest – speeches by women have come thick and fast, and have arguably been seen to make more of an impact than those by men – perhaps because a woman talking confidently in public still feels like it makes a statement in itself. Few speeches in the run-up to the 2016 election were as powerful as Michelle Obama’s ‘It hurts’ – which led the former speechwriter Philip Collins to write that Barack Obama ‘may be the best male speaker in living memory, and the second-best speaker in his own family’. Social media has amplified these voices and sent them worldwide. And if the story of the #metoo and #timesup movements has been one of women asserting sexual independence, it has been powered by women asserting their voices, asserting the right to be heard. ‘Speaking your truth’ has become a buzzphrase – and women (not to mention other hitherto marginalised groups) bearing witness has become a very large part of our cultural discourse.

Encouragingly, it’s not just tweets and Facebook updates either. One of the pivotal moments of the #metoo movement, for instance, was Oprah Winfrey’s acceptance speech at the 2018 Golden Globe awards. Social media may have sent it viral, but this was, in its way, as traditionally crafted a piece of oratory as you could find. It was a set-piece speech that turned on a brilliantly delivered tricolon (‘Their time is up. Their TIME is UP! Their time is up.’), where the disarming quietness of the third term gave her the quality of one reflecting on an unarguable truth rather than demanding a change. She piled on the ethos – speaking as a black woman who had experienced and survived poverty, racism and sexual harassment. She channelled the authority of
respected predecessors – Sidney Poitier, Recy Taylor, Rosa Parks and (subliminally) Martin Luther King. She used metonymy and enargia. And she played her audience like a violin.

You could see the same range and reach in a very different speech which also went round the world. Oprah Winfrey was already a superstar – but Emma Gonzalez was no sort of celebrity when she delivered her remarkable address to the March For Our Lives rally against gun violence in Washington DC. Ms Gonzalez was a survivor of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. In that speech she used all the traditional tools of oratory to evoke the human reality of those classmates she had lost in the shooting – while making clear how abruptly that reality had been cut off.

‘My friend Carmen would never complain to me about piano practice. Aaron Feis would never call Kyra Miss Sunshine. Alex Schachter would never walk into school with his brother Ryan …’, she began, and as her list of the dead continued she started to use ellipsis, the epistrophic refrain ‘would never … would never …’, leaving unsaid or implied all the things these young people would never do, and which could never be articulated in a single speech.

‘Alaina Petty would never, Cara Loughran would never, Chris Hixon would never, Luke Hoyer would never, Martin Duque Anguiano would never, Peter Wang would never, Alyssa Alhadeff would never, Jamie Guttenberg would never, Meadow Pollack would never.’

And then she did something remarkable. She made the hair-raising power move of lapsing into a silence that she held – stock-still, tears at her cheeks – for nearly four-and-a-half-minutes. And that silence – just – held the crowd. She ended it after a timer gave a peep and she continued: ‘Since the time that I came out here it has been six minutes and twenty seconds …’, which was the exact length of the
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shooting spree at her school. If she wasn’t a celebrity when she took that podium, she was world-famous by the time she left it.

So, is rhetoric dead? I don’t think so.

I’d like to wrap up this new preface by appealing to a source of ancient wisdom: Ian Malcolm, the chaos mathematician played by Jeff Goldblum in Jurassic Park. ‘The history of evolution is that life escapes all barriers,’ he says. ‘Life breaks free. Life expands to new territories. Painfully, perhaps even dangerously. But life finds a way.’ Substitute ‘rhetoric’ for ‘life’ in that quote, and it is no less true.

Rhetoric finds a way. Rhetoric always finds a way.

Sam Leith
London, January 2019