

WRITERS TALK ABOUT WRITING

December 10, 2007

Rediscovering the Power of Rhetoric

Oration. Recitation. Rhetoric. At one time these were the foundations of a classical literary education, an education that not only prepared you to write and communicate -- but taught you how to *think*. This style of learning, however, has largely gone the way of the top hat. But is it time for rhetoric to make a reprise? We had a fascinating and wide-ranging conversation with Harvard Professor James Engell, author of The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values, who revived the study of rhetoric at his university after a 60 year hiatus -- and who argues that a classical literary education is critical for today's communicators.

VT: What do you mean by a "classical literary education?"

Prof. Engell: Until the beginning of the 20th century, there was a tendency to view literary education more broadly than today. This literary education included things as foundational as grammar, verbal logic and rhetoric. That's the old trivium, a part of the curriculum of liberal arts.

What this meant was you started with the study of language to grasp the essentials, and then practice them by studying how other people have used them. One of the ways that you learn that is to imitate the way in which they wrote -- not to copy but to imitate. You're not going to end up writing that way, but it's a kind of template or model. For example, if someone were to show you how to play a musical instrument, they might say, "Here's a passage," and they might play a recording of someone who had performed it. It would give you an idea of how you might do it. Same idea with studying language.

Also, the definition of literature was broader. It meant not just poems, plays and novels and the criticism associated with them, which is what usually people take to mean by "literature" today. "Literature" back then really meant the written record of human experience, particularly anything in which attention was paid to the resourcefulness of language, its aesthetic qualities, its richness of vocabulary, its persuasive effects and its ability to engage emotion and intellect at the same time. Historical works were considered literature. Works on politics were generally considered to be

literary. So was philosophy and economics. Also, criticism of all kinds and "intellectual prose" -- a term that we don't hear too much today, that is, thoughtful non-fiction prose -- were considered to be literature.

VT: How did that broad definition narrow to the world of fiction and imaginative works?

Prof. Engell: The sense of literary education has narrowed maybe by necessity, because the world of knowledge has become more specialized. What happened in the 20th century was that education moved ahead. You had what I call the break-up of the "conglomerate" that had prevailed. The "conglomerate" was you would study rhetoric and aesthetics and fiction, and you'd also study poetry and intellectual prose. All of those together made up a literary education. But in the 20th century, Departments of Literature started focusing entirely on poems, plays, novels and aesthetic works, and their associated criticism. Communication, rhetoric and media studies no longer existed within, say, Departments of English. They spun off into different areas.

So pretty soon, instead of having a unified approach to the language arts, you had a series of different departments. And in some cases, entirely different schools, such as, say the School of Communication at Northwestern -- a very good school I admire, by the way -- and the like, where these things were divided up and spread around even more. What this meant is that if you studied one, you didn't necessarily study the other at all. So, they no longer, necessarily, informed one another. You no longer got a sense that someone who was studying poetry would know something about rhetoric or vice versa. Or someone who was studying prose fiction would know anything about studying logic in a verbal kind of way.

There has been an atomization of these skills and that means in some respects, they've advanced because they've become more specialized. So we have a lot more scholarship on literary works now than we used to. We have a lot more theories of rhetoric and composition than we used to. But, there is a potential negative effect, too -- which is that no one student is asked to pull everything together in any kind of way. And, therefore, they don't.

VT: What is the power of that classical education? Why is it so important to learn rhetoric, look at historical examples - do the things you described?

Prof. Engell: That's really a good question. You find people like Thomas Jefferson and Daniel Webster and even Abraham Lincoln saying that the ultimate goal of a classical education is to create a sense of judgment or practical wisdom so that you can read the motivations of individuals or groups, weigh evidence, estimate probabilities of events happening or not happening, or try to examine why it is that someone would try to persuade you of something or argue for something. With rhetoric, you can test the hidden assumptions in someone's argument, because very few arguments begin without any assumptions at all. You can try to find the prejudices of the writer, intellectual prejudices, perhaps, or social prejudices out of ignorance.

Rhetoric permits you an ability to evaluate a written piece in a way that not only recognizes, but in some sense judges, its social, political or personal context. This is very hard. If the work is purely aesthetic, meaning if it's fictional, the word that's usually used for this level of judgment is "taste." We say somebody has developed taste for such and such in poetry or fiction. But when it comes to works that are not fictional, taste enters in to some extent, but we end up speaking more about judgment or discipline.

VT: How do you develop that judgment?

Prof. Engell: Judgment's an extraordinarily hard thing to teach. People in law schools talk about how hard it is to teach. But it can be the most important thing a law student learns. Being a judge is considered to be the apex of one's legal career. Judgment means you have to look into verbal constructs. And by verbal I mean, simply made of language. I don't mean oral. I mean, made of words. You have to look into verbal constructs, and you have to see the reality behind them -- the social reality, the personal reality, the historical reality.

That's why somebody like Learned Hand, who may be one of the greatest judges ever to sit on the Supreme Court, said that if you really want to be a good judge, you ought to read the Greek historians and Shakespeare. He gave a whole list of readings. Why? Because they help you understand human folly, human capacities, human motivations, the way that emotions cloud judgment, the way that people can be selfish or good Samaritans and so forth. It's a kind of second order of experience. And when you understand that second order of experience and study it and are faced with the

appearance of something in politics or in law or in, say, a local town meeting, then you can better judge it. There's no guarantee you'll judge it perfectly because the whole world of rhetoric is about appearances. You can indeed be fooled.

That's what's actually behind that remark of Abraham Lincoln's, that wonderful quote, "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time." In other words, dissimulation, eventually, gets found out. The idea is that one of the tools that you have in studying language is this way to ferret out dissimulation, to understand when things somehow don't quite click.

Now, journalism's a terribly important part of it. Traditionally, rhetoric had been aimed at people in religion because they had to persuade and teach, people in the academy because they had to teach and expand, and people in law because they had to try cases, persuade judges and juries. But I argue that in the modern world, in the post-Enlightenment world, journalism and the media is now the fourth leg of rhetorical study.

VT: It sounds like it's critically important to bring these skills back into education.

Prof. Engell: I believe that, yes. And I don't think we're doing it enough. I started teaching a course in rhetoric in the year 2000. I did it because nobody else was doing it at the college where I teach, at Harvard. And nobody else had done it for a long time, I mean, in decades. The last time public speaking was taught was in the early 70's, I believe. Many institutions dropped the study of rhetoric and public speaking because, somehow, it was thought of as slightly mechanical and old-fashioned -- and not as prestigious as writing extended literary criticism on fictional works or coming up with critical theories about literature.

That's too bad because I think that rhetoric can contribute to those undertakings. But even more important, it also has a great deal to do with how we educate citizens. We live in a deliberative democracy. In order to get laws passed, make judgments, have agreements and compromises, write treaties with other countries, negotiate contracts and the like, you've got to have an understanding of language. It's terribly important. All of those

things that in a free society are transmitted through language are subject to debate. Or almost all of them.

Since this is the case, it's more important than ever for students and citizens to have the kind of education which lets them judge how something is put together, whether it's an advertisement, a news story, a 20-minute political stump speech or something they read in a textbook. Rhetoric gives them that power to judge. And also, when they do something in their own lives to persuade or sell something -- whatever it is -- then, they can use that analytical power in an active way.

VT: But can't that rhetorical power be dangerous, too?

Prof. Engell: Traditionally, rhetorical power was regarded as potentially negative because you could persuade people of things that were, in fact, wrong. You could induce them to do things that were evil. The classic example of rhetoric turned to sour ends was Hitler's rhetoric. You can have somebody who has a lot of verbal skills and is a magnetic speaker, but is the devil incarnate. So traditionally in the Anglo-American world, the study of rhetoric was combined with the study of moral philosophy.

Most of the professors of rhetoric in this country during the 17th to 19th centuries were called "professors of rhetoric and moral philosophy" because it was felt that you had to get ethics in there along with the arts of persuasion and analysis. If you didn't get ethics in there, then you were simply giving people a very sharp sword, without any sense of which army they should be fighting in.

I happen to think that if we teach rhetoric and the language arts without some sense of how they can and have been used unethically, and how they might be used in a deliberative democracy more ethically, then we're not teaching them fully. In this case, we're just teaching students instrumentality, rather than something that can actually improve people's lives.

VT: This is more important than ever.

Prof. Engell: Absolutely. The power of the media now, particularly the electronic media, can have such an impact, be so influential. It can be so segmented and directed to certain parts of the population so

demographically specific that it can have an enormous effect. This was recognized in the 19th century in America through the medium of newspapers. If you go to Andrew Jackson's home, the Hermitage, for example, you'll see that Jackson's library is not so much filled with books, as it's filled with bound newspapers.

VT: Really?

Prof. Engell: Yes, he was a great, great newspaper reader. In the 20th and 21st centuries, of course, the impact has multiplied beyond newspapers. We've got radio, talk radio, TV, cable news, special programs, the web, podcasts, you name it. So it's all the more important that our students and citizens can somehow have a critical perspective on all this communication and analyze it -- and tell what a false conclusion is because the syllogism is not put together well. Or tell that somebody's trying to do an induction on a set of circumstances, but the conclusion is shaky, and so forth.

As Aristotle said, rhetoric is not a particular subject. It's a set of tools, a kind of analysis and practice that you can apply to many different subjects. You can apply it to politics, literature, or economics. But it isn't purely quantitative. You can apply it to religion and law -- anything that's deliberative.

Let me also say that it's not rocket science. In other words, if someone wants to study rhetoric on their own, they can. They don't need a special language to learn it. They don't need training or someone sitting next to them as you might need, say, if somebody said, "We're going to do some multivariable calculus now."

It doesn't have to be dry memorization of lists of terms. That's not what rhetoric is. Rhetoric is understanding the way the mind works when it constructs arguments in language. You can give terms to different ways in which the mind works. But the most important thing is to understand the different kinds of ways in which the mind works and expresses itself.