

# Literature, Rhetoric and Values



Literature, Rhetoric and Values:  
Selected Proceedings of a Conference  
held at the University of Waterloo, 3-5 June 2011

Edited by

Shelley Hulan, Murray McArthur  
and Randy Allen Harris

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Literature, Rhetoric and Values:  
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This volume is dedicated to the memory of

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

1949 - 2011

Provocateur. Literateur. Gentleman.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Literature, Rhetoric, and Values Conference concluded twelve months of 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in the University of Waterloo's Department of English Language and Literature, celebrations that themselves took several years to organize. The editors of this volume also served as the anniversary committee, and in both those capacities, we incurred numerous debts of gratitude. It is a pleasure to discharge them partially here.

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An impressive line up of Visiting Speakers headlined a series of events throughout our 50<sup>th</sup> year, leading up to the conference. We would like to thank them all for their contributions to the scholarly climate in our department: Nick Rombes, David B. Morrell, Mary Louise Pratt, Elaine Showalter, Gordon Campbell, and Terry Eagleton. Our gratitude as well to Jay Dolmage, who helped coordinate the speaker series.

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its inception in 2008. We do not thank her here for any single task, but rather for performing *all* of the above-listed jobs at one time or another over the past four years in addition to her virtually uninterrupted provision of written content for the Department's website in the form of updates, timelines, and alumni profiles. Her organization, professionalism, and engaging manner won praise both from the people she interviewed and those Department members with whom she has worked on a near-daily basis for the past four years. Jesse, Kevin, and Amber also contributed directly and substantially to the production of this volume, copyediting and factchecking all of the contributions; Amber, rising yet again above the expected, further provided the templates and styles, ensuring a homogeneity to the manuscript, out of the disparate submissions, that helped keep the typesetters from going mad.

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The English Department's fearless leader, Fraser Easton, was the first to have the idea of a 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year of celebratory events, and subsequently championed the committee's vision of a conference shaped by the defining themes of our department. As Department chair Fraser oversaw the project from start to finish and was a tireless advocate on our, and the Department's, behalf as we secured the funding, venues, and technologies needed to realize the year that he conceived many years ago.

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Enormous draws for the conference attendees were Literature, Rhetoric, and Values' keynote speakers Barry Brummett (Charles Sapp Centennial Professor in Communication and Department of Communication Studies

Chair, University of Texas at Austin), Carolyn R. Miller (SAS Institute Distinguished Professor of Rhetoric and Technical Communication, North Carolina State University), and James Phelan (Distinguished University Professor and Professor of English, The Ohio State University). Professor Brummett did double duty as one of our plenary debate participants, engaging in a witty, urbane conversation with Christopher Hitchens that both the live and YouTube audiences have thoroughly enjoyed.

We sincerely thank the late Mr. Hitchens for keeping his engagement digitally, as he was not obligated to do, despite his illness having gone into a phase that by June 2011 had made his in-person appearance impossible.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of a conference grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which funded the conference and the publication of these selected proceedings.



## INTRODUCTION

SHELLEY HULAN, MURRAY MCARTHUR  
AND RANDY ALLEN HARRIS

In June 2011, the Literature, Rhetoric, and Values Conference brought an international group of scholars to the University of Waterloo to debate the nexus of literature and rhetoric with values, broadly defined as the principles and beliefs that matter most to human beings and that they use as guides to acting appropriately in the world. Literature and rhetoric were closely paired for millennia. Aristotle cites Sophocles in the *Rhetoric*, Longinus cites Demosthenes in *On Sublime*. The rhetorical Ars Poetica developed alongside the equally rhetorical Ars Dictaminis through the Middle Ages. Humanism was born in Petrarch's Letters to Cicero, the great poet of the 14<sup>th</sup> century writing letters to the great rhetorician of the Classical period. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the belletristic movement was equal parts rhetoric and literature. And this pairing through the millennia frequently had a very common theme, values. Petrarch's letters are about the conflict between Cicero's duty to the Republic and his duty to Literature. The belletristic movement was a rhetorical program founded on literature, a program to shape better citizens, better people, on the basis of how they spoke and what they read.

All literature has a rhetorical quotient. All rhetoric has a literary (or "poetic") quotient. The difference is a matter of emphasis, of orientation toward one of the two pole stars, persuasion and aesthetics. Rhetoric is inherently narrow, targeted, laser-guided by the pole star of persuasion. Literature is inherently broad, open, oriented by the pole star of aesthetics. Works of overt rhetoric, Kenneth Burke tells us, "might conceivably argue the cause of Love rather than Duty, or the other way round"; in literature, however, "a profound dramatizing of the conflict" between Love and Duty is rather the focus, "for in this field the imitation of great practical or moral problems is itself a source of gratification" (*Language* 296).

But, aside from the work of a very few scholars—Burke, Herbert Wichelns, Wayne Booth—rhetorical and literary theory (and, in parallel,

rhetorical and literary pedagogy) drifted apart for most of the last century. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized on one side by the atrophy of rhetorical studies, to the fields of composition and public speaking, on the other side by the growing autonomy, theoretical sophistication, and institutional power of literary criticism. Much of that autonomy was not only from rhetorical theory, but equally from the great theme they shared, values. A rapprochement is underway, however, spurred in part by the constellation of literary-study interests broadly known as cultural studies, and in part by developments in rhetorical studies like the growth of genre studies, a return to aesthetics, and the remembrance from its past that literature generates the most richly persuasive texts of all.

Treated for much of the past century as discrete subjects, that is, literature and rhetoric have in the new century attracted the attention of scholars who advocate for their interdisciplinary *rapprochement* as a necessary step to the realization of their position in the humanities as a major vehicle of the “powerful relations between language and human motivation, between words and values” (Engell 1), and the Waterloo conference celebrates that rapprochement. The organizers’ rationale for the conference—that literature and rhetoric occupy a unique position in relation to values as modes of writing that consistently give them new representation, fresh commentary, and rigorous review—generated a strong response from both established and emerging scholars, whose work now continues its conversation in this second dialogue, the volume now in your hands.

As one might expect from a conference aiming to foster a better understanding of the ways in which literature and rhetoric contend with values, many of the essays in these selected proceedings query, implicitly or explicitly, the disciplinary boundaries between the first two of our organizing terms. While the shared past of these two fields in the Western tradition is familiar enough to make rehearsing it unnecessary, reviewing literary study’s emergence as a distinct discipline and its attendant separation from rhetorical concerns as a discrete field usefully illuminates the pair’s relationship to values in the particular historical context of North America, the continent where the conference participants all live and work and where English studies arose as a distinct field. As a separate subject in the academy, English literature did not exist before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it emerged as an entity distinct from the other subjects—philology, classical studies, and rhetoric and belles-lettres—that had included literature in some form without making it a primary focus of inquiry. But as the British Empire expanded to its broadest Victorian girth, and as its American heirs continued to increase their territory, settler colonies and

new nations in North America introduced the study of English-language literature in their fledgling universities. Although “both traditional and revisionist accounts of the ‘rise’ of English studies generally assume a particular timetable based on the development of English studies at Oxbridge,” Heather Murray comments in *Working in English: History, Institutions, Resources*, “‘English’ in Canada (and indeed in the United States) was in place almost fifty years before its transatlantic counterpart was well developed” (9). The advent of the English department at the height of the great colonial migrations from Western Europe suggests that the study of English literature functioned as a vehicle through which these predominantly English-speaking peoples asserted the superiority of the language and the culture that they brought with them as they sought to establish their political and military dominance over the non-English-speaking New World. It was, in short, a value-saturated enterprise from the outset. Yet although English studies was initially galvanized by high colonial and incipient settler-nationalist fervour marked by a lingering affection for the romance of empire (if not always its reality), the field quickly developed in other directions. The study of literature in a modern language did not long limit itself to mirroring colonial, national, or neo-imperial norms back at its teachers and students. It also became a lamp that illuminated those values in ways that demanded another kind of project, this one more interrogative than triumphalist. A discipline that initially regarded literature as an expression and inculcator of specific social values such as the absolute superiority of linguistic and cultural Englishness adopted more exploratory approaches to what English language and culture were. If English literature held the key to national identity and national pride, then what should happen to it when new nations form? Should American and Canadian texts replace British works on the curriculum? As Sarah Hart points out in her essay in this volume, “Rhetorics of Loss: Values of Absence and Affect in Frost and Dickinson,” literary works taken at particular times to hold special meaning for a nation’s members show both how literary interpretation can change in moments of crisis and trauma and how (as this phenomenon would suggest) this literature thus reveals something about national identity—perhaps, that identity metamorphoses over time.

More recently, questions about what precisely “English literature” means have resurfaced in debates over originality, the author’s relation to his or her work, and what exactly constitutes literary innovation. These debates pose interesting questions for readers of texts like David Shields’s *Reality Hunger*, as Danielle Koupf observes in her *Proceedings* contribution, “David Shields’s *Reality Hunger* and the Value of Textual Recycling.” By

creating a text that consists of hundreds of quotations from other texts, including his own, while openly refusing to follow standard citation practices, Shields up-ends readers' received notions of stealing, plagiarism, and creativity, challenging them to see his "reality-based art" as an inventive representation of the world they live in rather than simply as a fraud in need of punishment.

True to the intertwined histories of both literature and rhetoric, values belong to the very warp and weft of their recent nexus. Born partly of a conviction in the identity-giving power of a contemporary language and its narrative and poetic expressions, modern literary studies in English have thrived by demonstrating that literature raises questions about what matters through particular characters and situations that give values a concrete form, while at the same time it gives readers the chance to think about those values in an imaginative space removed from the world in which they live and act. In "A Rhetoric of Contingency and Analytic Humanism in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," Robert Clapperton examines a comfortable middle-class world recognizable to many of us, a world that could be our home. In this novel, a high degree of verisimilitude draws attention to the illusions that lull the characters into a false sense of security. When "human motives, histories, identities, and values are measured and coded into the forms of consumption and technology," Clapperton argues of the novel, "possessions define us while technology measures our existence and promises well being and comfort." This promise depends on levels of consumerism unsustainable in the world of *White Noise*, as in our own. The novel immerses its readers in the demise of that world, allowing us to reflect on these issues in a way that would surely elude us were this scenario to play out in our world, in real life. It perfectly exemplifies Burke's point that literature at its best addresses great practical and moral problems. Another contribution to this volume, by Alla Ivanchikova, probes texts equally shaped by current political and ideological climates, but aligned more closely by Burke's other pole star, overt persuasion. Indeed, our experience editing the selected proceedings tells us that objects in the mirror are often closer than they appear and pose a corresponding threat if ignored. As this volume was being edited, a young French-Algerian citizen opened fire on the Ozar Hatorah Jewish day school in Toulouse, having in the previous week shot and killed several of the French soldiers in that city. His actions and subsequent death in a shoot-out with police reignited the fractious debate over France's, and indeed Europe's, trouble coming to terms with its multi-ethnic composition. Ivanchikova probes these issues in her "Living in the Shadow of Radicalism: Fundamentalist Identities in Monica Ali's *Brick*

*Lane* (2003) and in Elena Chudinova's *2048: The Mosque of Notre Dame de Paris* (2005)." Ivanchikova examines the explosive conditions in two novels that make implicit arguments about multiculturalism against the backdrop of European nations, many of which continue to conceive of themselves as predominantly Christian and Caucasian. In another objects-closer-in-the-mirror moment, Andrew McMurtry's contribution urgently reflects not the ideological climate this time, but the *geophysical* climate. As this volume goes to press in the summer of 2012, North America swelters through its most recent hottest summer on record (it is the latest in an uninterrupted line of summers to hold the title). A fifth consecutive year of drought scorches much of the continent and microbursts wreak havoc down the Eastern seaboard. In the United States, a federal appeals court agreed with the Environmental Protection Agency that "heat-trapping gases from industry and vehicles endanger public health, dealing a decisive blow to companies and states that had sued to block agency rules" (Wald); meanwhile, environmental activists continue to warn that it may be too late to correct the climate changes now threatening the global food supply. McMurtry's "*Children of Men* on *The Road* to Nowhere: The Inopinatum of Hope" simultaneously offers and scrutinizes hope as perhaps the last appropriate, but very possibly inadequate, response to these environmental crises. The critique, if not the affirmation, belong less to the works McMurtry interprets than his own rhetorical acumen and wit. Yet literary studies, as his title indicates, make frequent use of the classical Western rhetorical vocabulary of terms for figures, tropes, and schemes as equally applicable to the drama and poetry that were once a branch of *that* field as to more recognizably persuasive genres.

Viewed as complementary rather than separate, literary and rhetorical studies can anticipate changes in values as they stimulate innovation in their overlapping textual forms. Michael Sloane's "Poetry, Garbage, Gift: Scrap Poetics in Contemporary North American Poetry," for instance, posits that a new poetry of fragments that have apparently been discarded from other texts (exemplified in such works as Myung Mi Kim's *Penury*) transmits "highly polemical values" that call for a rethinking of human relationships to the things that North Americans abandon. Amy Larsen's argument follows this line in her "The Duty of Memory in J.P. Stassen's *Deo gratias: A Tale of Rwanda* and Rupert Bazambanza's *Smile Through the Tears*." Arguing that "fictionalized perspectives on the [Rwandan] genocide can be valuable when they question assumptions about why and how one should remember trauma," Larsen shows what picture frames can add to the narrative, which is not so much visual illustration as an additional means of deploying particular narrative and persuasive

strategies that guide the representation of that holocaust in two very different directions.

Surprisingly, given their long, braided histories, divisions between rhetoric and literature frequently seem much more evident than their kinship. It is, after all, easy to speak about literature, and to interpret it, without ever referring to the discipline that, in the West, introduced the terms of its analysis. Paul Fussell's venerated study of English prosody, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, never once mentions rhetoric by name despite the author's dependency on Aristotle for the terms of his discussion. Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* still initiates thousands of undergraduates annually into the intricacies of literary theory barely mentioning rhetoric at all (the word occurs three times in her textbook, in each case as part of a title, two of them to Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*), as she introduces readers to a subject, literary theory, that is primarily focused on making arguments about literature. What has been true for the past several decades remains true today; for if, in his recent and positively-reviewed *You Talkin' To Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*, Sam Leith can define his subject as "A field of knowledge: that is, something susceptible to analysis and understanding in the same way poetry is" (2), then it is safe to say that whatever their historical connections, literature and rhetoric are now far too often understood and treated as mutually exclusive fields.

Nor has the explosion of new media in the century and a half since the advent of English literature studies as a field made a reintegration seem more exigent. Literature and rhetoric have largely maintained their distinction from each other while postsecondary programs in film, communications, cultural studies, and digital media have exponentially increased the range of texts available for analysis using the analytical tools that originate in rhetoric and are commonly used in both fields. Carolyn R. Miller's essay in this volume, adapted from her keynote address to the conference, draws lines of convergence among rhetoric, literature, and media studies from the longstanding literary and rhetorical term, *genre*, showing not only how it has become surprisingly ubiquitous in ordinary language discussions of books, movies, music, video games, and other cultural artifacts, but this usage reflects a phenomenon that critics need to attend more closely. Especially compelling in her "New Genres, Now and Then" are the parallels she highlights between early modern culture and contemporary culture. Both periods are defined by an explosion of new technologies, centred in one new and powerful medium (respectively, print and digital), and the corresponding explosion of different expressive opportunities, genres.

Sara Humphreys's essay interestingly finds a cultural genre that escapes Miller's notice, which she calls "Literary Things"—physical artifacts rooted in literary experiences, such as monuments or salt-and-pepper shakers. Her "How Kenneth Burke Can Explain Hannah Duston's Appeal (and other Literary Things)" analyzes Hannah Duston monuments as key to the invention of Duston as a national hero. Drawing on Burke's conception of dialectic, Humphreys details these objects' production and reproduction of Duston as an early American patriot, inventorying and critiquing the values these figures have represented over the past two centuries. Literary and rhetorical forms also serve as instruments on which writers in different disciplines rely because they facilitate possible defenses of, experiments with, and militancy against, specific values in specialized areas of expertise. Rhetoric functions most often by taking sides, pressing for immediate judgment and action. Literature functions rather by re-zoning potential conflicts over divergent values from the real world to a virtual one, constructing a safer space for the expression of contentious disagreement and fostering the free exploration of different values in all their possible implications. The pre-eminence that literature grants to speculation has also rendered it especially able to register incipient changes to conventional values before more specialized discourses can give those changes a name, and rhetoric can take up the arguments. Several papers at the conference scrutinized texts belonging to specific disciplines such as medicine, advertising, politics, religion, and the military, and that appear in particular contexts—war, food supply crises, civil disobedience, resource scarcity—to examine how writers in these disciplines draw on literary and rhetorical techniques to articulate established values and to foresee transformations in them. Inevitably over the last few decades, questions have arisen about whether the proliferation of genre-bending narratives, performances, and online forums require a new glossary to account for developments in written and verbal discourses. The answer is no. For whether scholars like Fussell and Leith, or for that matter tweeters and bloggers, acknowledge it or not, the vocabulary that rhetoric supplies remains indispensable to their discussions not only because that vocabulary names the elements of suasion with extraordinary precision and capaciousness but because that vocabulary is itself merely the outermost, superficial expression of rhetorical theory's real end purpose, to maintain and update a comprehensive anatomy of suasion in all its manifestations. Thus it should come as no surprise that rhetorical terms remain indispensable to understanding the functions of texts such as Colby Buzzell's "blook" (blog-turned-book), *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, the focus of Lydia

Wilkes's contribution. In ““Now Here’s What Really Happened”: The Rhetoric of Authentic Experience in War Memoir,” Wilkes argues that Buzzell’s eyewitness descriptions of battle from the front line use a vernacular that makes a strong pathetic appeal to the followers of his blog, who proclaimed his accounts more trustworthy than those of the American government and the mainstream media. Like many a successful rhetor, Buzzell builds credibility with his audience emotionally, and Wilkes scrutinizes the “authenticity effect” that Buzzell’s work achieves through this pathos, an effect that she notes has also become a central goal for the creators of contemporary video war games such as the *Call of Duty* franchise.

Buzzell’s work is particularly exemplary for the constellation of themes driving this volume, as it is most productively examined through a blend of literary and rhetorical analysis, and the rhetorical component of Wilkes’s analysis reveals the particularly persuasive approach to values. Where literary analysis tends to focus on the myriad different representations of values a literary text makes available, rhetorical analysis is especially sensitive to *audience* values, which shape the persuasive strategies of given texts. The primacy of audience orientation is quite clear in Buzzell’s memoir, which he revised from blog posts that had generated a great deal of follower feedback.

So axiomatic to persuasive success is this sensitivity to audience values that the Pentagon, as Michael MacDonald argues in “Black Logos: Rhetoric and Information Warfare,” has poured astounding financial and human resources into understanding internet-user values as part of a large and disturbing project aimed at saturating the web with authentic-seeming disinformation. In this approach, no single text matters. Rather, the mission can only succeed by disseminating millions of texts throughout the internet and, for ultimate success, the “noosphere.” Rhetoric is most effective when it is invisible.

The medium is very much a part of the message in rhetorical analysis. Like MacDonald’s chapter, Christine Horton’s “Coercive Information: Rhetorics of Digital Torture” investigates the role that digital media increasingly plays in military operations, this time as a mechanism of torture, a resource for inflicting suffering on individuals not by subjecting their bodies to pain but by using personal information gathered on the victims effectively to alter the environment in which they are interrogated. Again, although the persuasion in this case involves texts (the texts that supply information on the victim and that the interviewer has found using digital media), the texts accessed are a means to the torturer’s end of knowing his audience, the better to “convince” it that resistance is

pointless. The technology, as much as the content it transmits, makes achieving this aim possible.

At first glance, asking how such uses of rhetoric relate to humanistic values seems ludicrous. Surely the only possible relation between their proponents is one of reciprocal contempt. That humanistic concerns are sometimes perceived as antithetical to technology, usually defined instrumentally as a kind of ever-progressing applied mechanics, only seems to validate the view that rhetoric lacks literature's—and English studies'—deep commitment to humanism. But we need firstly to focus on the difference between rhetoric—texts overtly designed to persuade—and rhetorical criticism, the field in which the persuasive dimensions of all texts are probed. And we need secondly to distinguish the values of the analysis from the values of the artifact. Burke's famous reading of *Mein Kampf* does not celebrate, for instance, how “the categorical dignity of superior race was a perfect recipe for the situation” of 1930s Germany (“Hitler's Battle,” 205); it reveals the sinister depths of such rhetorical moves in order to “guard against [them], if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America” (“Hitler's Battle,” 191). The motives of much cultural theory, in exposing the socially dangerous and spiritually maiming effects of discourses, are much of a piece with many streams of rhetorical criticism.

Rhetorical criticism's foci on the medium of delivery, on *kairos*, on genre and pathos and manifold other aspects of the context in which persuasion takes place constantly insists that no values are ever animated exclusively inside a text. Their emergence is a lived event that takes place in real time and in competition with other values. Much as one may reject the values that guide the torturer, those values have developed in circumstances that have to be understood as part of a particular historical and political moment that will change in time, and whose change might be guided by the rhetorically informed critic.

It is difficult, however, to repudiate moving targets. Conviction in the truth of this point helps motivate the protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*, as contributor Brian Jansen interprets him in “‘Imitation of Life’: Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Construction of Augustinian Ethos.” An incorrigibly untrustworthy narrator, Kinbote nevertheless convinces most readers that they can believe his account of his life, a fact Jansen establishes by showing that few critical commentaries on the novel dispute the narrator's most obvious inconsistencies. By leveraging Augustine's notion of a ‘displaced’ ethos (from the individual to the text), Jansen charts the many complications of Kinbote's credibility.

## §

The Waterloo Literature, Rhetoric, and Values Conference amply fulfilled the promise of two rich, historically and intellectually enmeshed, humanistic enterprises, and their mutual concern with the defining aspect of human discourse, human life, values. Other creatures *have* values. Anyone who has walked past an agitated Pekinese or a soliciting pigeon can attest to their likes and dislikes; and even amoebae have nutritional preferences, find harsh lights repellent, enjoy motion. But only humans *worry* about values, probe them, restructure them, build symbolic structures (epics, cultures, nations) around them, debate them. One of the highlights of the conference (there were many) was the final-night dialectical exchange between rhetorician Barry Brummett and the late, lamented critic and bon vivant, Christopher Hitchens, moderated by Canadian radio broadcaster, Jian Ghomeshi. Not quite a debate, in the pro-and-con, oppositional, fight-unto-symbolic-death sense, the two wrangled and negotiated over the proposition, “Religion has been a positive force in culture.”

Hitchens fulminated eloquently about the countless atrocities associated with religion, spinning off his familiarly acerbic witticisms (“The gods we have made are exactly the gods you would expect to be made from a species about a half a chromosome away from being chimpanzees”) and rhetorical figures (like this prosopopeia channelling Mother Theresa, ““Don’t pay any attention to me. I’m just going around doing God’s work all the time.” ... a tremendously arrogant claim” (Orchard) and this interrogatio, “How do we retain what is of value and of beauty in contributions from [religion] while discarding the superstition, the theocracy, the censorship, the torture, the intimidation that were just as necessary to that system and just as much a part of its legacy to us?”). Prof. Brummett, for his part, tried to reorient the exchange around the larger issue of people’s desperation for easy answers, with their corresponding inclination to devote energy and passion to systems of explicit rules, from religions or from self-help gurus or from dietary manuals. “Wouldn’t you like someone to tell you whether you should spank your child or not?” Brummett asked the audience. “Otherwise you do the wrong thing and 20 years later the kid climbs a library tower with a .30-06 (rifle) and it’s your fault.” (Quotations from Monteiro, except where otherwise noted). We especially liked Brummett’s proposed response to a culture of fanaticism: a broadly rhetorical and literary education that focuses critical thought, particularized judgement, and social inclusiveness. All in all, the exchange was far less heated than most

public debates and than virtually every other public exchange featuring Mr. Hitchens. As one blogger put it, “Hitchens and Brummett mostly agree, and no stupidity is to be found. Rather refreshing, about what I would hope for from a Canadian forum” (Exploder).<sup>1</sup>

The dialectical exchange, that is, was more Ciceronian than Platonic, in that it worked toward common ground from divergent starting points, rather than working towards a smack-down victory for one party. No resolution was reached, of course. The question was big and we only had two hours and a bit (the bit was charmingly added by the terminally ill but irrepressibly energetic Hitchens who asked to keep it going as the moderator tried to end the question period, saying “I don’t really have any other plans for tonight”). But the movement, like that of the conference overall, was toward rapprochement, not toward division. The lack of a definitive conclusion in the debate was another way in which it reflected the conference overall. Again, there wasn’t sufficient time (three days). Again, the question was big (how best to bring rhetoric, literature, and values back into a rewarding alignment). But the progress was impressive, the manifold insights promising, and the future of that alignment very auspicious, as the proceedings now in your hands show.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Textual publication of the debate would have both delayed these proceedings and reduced the vibrancy of the original exchange. We have therefore made it available on Youtube in eight parts, the first of which is at (and the others available from): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfVJCmkchwc&feature=plcp>. See also, Hulan.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## RHETORICS OF LOSS: VALUES OF ABSENCE AND AFFECT IN FROST AND DICKINSON

### SARAH HART

Less than one month after 9/11, Dinitia Smith of *The New York Times* wrote that, “In the weeks since the terrorist attacks, people have been consoling themselves—and one another—with poetry in an almost unprecedented way,” an assertion supported by the many poems and verses accompanying photos of victims at Ground Zero, in makeshift memorials all around New York City, and in emails exchanged among friends and family. According to Ellen Louise Hart, Emily Dickinson’s lyric, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—” repeatedly served as a source for post-9/11 consolation: Cartoonist Lynda Barry drew her September comic strip around Dickinson’s lyric (Hart 72), and, for its fall 2001 advisory publication, the Dickinson Homestead included the same poem accompanied by a note to readers conveying its “hope that Dickinson’s poems speak to you in your efforts to cope, to remember, to recover” in the wake of September 11th (Hart 71). Such communal reliance on poetry during times of mourning is not new. Jeffrey Walker points out that poetry and epigrams mediated public responses to loss even in ancient Hellenic culture. In his *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (hereafter cited as *Rhetoric*), Walker explains how epigrammatic poetry on Attic and Spartan graves appeals to an audience’s common knowledge that “the mortality of human beings is pitiable” (252-53), a public appeal that serves as a “means of reaffirming . . . an audience’s value-hierarchies and its sense of self-identity” (255). Such affirmation may be a source of consolation in the face of death; yet, as Walker emphasizes, it is also a kind of epideictic argument.

This essay argues that, like ancient poetry, contemporary lyric poetry about loss, such as Dickinson’s “After great pain,” can and does function

epideictically, especially for audiences coping with personal and communal losses such as 9/11. This claim addresses a controversy among scholars of rhetoric and poetics about the degree to which contemporary poetry is epideictic in the original sense of the term. For example, Walker concludes that contemporary poetry is merely “a minor kind of epideictic” (*Rhetoric* 330) that lacks the persuasive force of ancient lyrics. Scholars such as Walter Jost and J. Douglas Kneale, however, argue that at least some contemporary poems do appeal epideictically; for example, Jost argues that many of Robert Frost’s lyrics exemplify what he calls the genre of “low modernist, epideictic lyric” (320). I draw on Jost’s epideictic criteria to illustrate how some contemporary lyrics about loss, such as Dickinson’s “After great pain,” affirm a sense of community for mournful audiences.

I treat Dickinson’s poem and Robert Frost’s “Desert Places” as case studies that represent how various short lyrics about loss, grief, and mourning may appeal epideictically to readers. Although not as thoroughly documented as allusions to Dickinson in the wake of 9/11, Robert Frost has been repeatedly cited in responses to this tragedy. On September 11, 2005, *The New York Times* journalist Paul Vitello cited Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” to clarify the “terror” of 9/11 and its aftermath; Ed Russin, whose son perished in the attack, found consolation in a Frost quotation (Staff); and actress Melissa Leo read Frost’s “Acquainted with the Night” at a 9/11 tribute held on the tragedy’s tenth anniversary (TNR Staff). Frost’s “Desert Places” has not yet been theorized as epideictic, but it exhibits epideictic and elegiac features like those of Dickinson’s “After great pain.” Both poems speak to contemporary readers from their places in widely-read anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*.

Frost and Dickinson use epideictic conventions of discovery and self-display to represent their speakers’ lack of emotion, which signifies their inability to connect with other people and with themselves. Unable even to assert their own personhood, these speakers convey a loss of creative agency, which Emmanuel Levinas aligns with death. Although these speakers do not express typical grief, the poems may evoke mourning in readers, emphasizing the value of emotion in the face of loss. Levinas helps clarify the death-like nature of Dickinson’s and Frost’s incapacities, while the genre of epideictic helps us clarify how these kinds of short lyric poems about loss affirm community and may console grieving writers and readers alike. To demonstrate these poems’ epideictic, elegiac nature, this essay first addresses the controversy over contemporary lyric’s epideictic status, and then closely reads Frost’s and Dickinson’s poems through

epideictic and Levinasian theories, showing how their epideictic appeals may mediate writers' and readers' confrontations with loss.

## Histories of Rhetoric and Poetry

Walker emphasizes poetry's and rhetoric's shared roots in antiquity, claiming that "what comes to be called the art of rhetoric . . . in fact originates . . . from an expansion of the poetic/epideictic realm" (Walker, *Rhetoric* 18). The Greek word *poiēsis* preceded *rhētorikē*: Connoting "doing" or "making," the term "*poiēsis*" emerged from "*aoideî*" or "song" in the fifth century B.C. (Walker, *Rhetoric* 19), whereas the terms "*rhētor*" and "*technē* "*rhētorikē*" did not arise until "the late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C." (Walker, *Rhetoric* 26). Poetic/epideictic discourses, "rhythmically structured, tropologically figured . . . and . . . chanted, or sung" (Walker, *Rhetoric* 11), were performed at public, communal events such as "festivals and ceremonial or symposiastic occasions" (Walker, *Rhetoric* 7). Aristotle distinguished these ceremonial discourses from pragmatic genres like forensic and deliberative rhetoric, defining epideictic as a rhetorical genre that focuses on praise and blame (48), targets an audience of "observer[s]," not judges, and is more concerned with "the present" (48) than with the past or the future. Translating "*epideixis*" as "to shine or show forth," Lawrence W. Rosenfield emphasizes the genre's aim to "display" (135). For Rosenfield, the epideictic speaker displays "what is," including conditions, assumptions, and values that are taken for granted, "for the community's benefit" (145).

Walker similarly claims that epideictic discourse, whether prose or verse, "cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives" and "shapes . . . the 'deep' commitments and presuppositions" that produce and affirm community (*Rhetoric* 9). In light of this historical context, it is possible to view Americans' public, poetic responses to the 9/11 catastrophe as functioning epideictically, not unlike the epideictic uses of poetry in antiquity. According to Walker, however, contemporary poetry lacks a "capacity for speaking across boundaries *persuasively* or for mounting culturally significant epideictic eloquence that does more than simply reconfirm the group's existing pieties and hierarchies of value" (*Rhetoric* 330). In "Aristotle's Lyric: Re-Imagining the Rhetoric of Epideictic Song," Walker attributes the loss of ancient poetry's epideictic force to Aristotle's emphasis on mimesis as the lyric's defining trait (10), which rendered the lyric "essentially apostrophic" (13). In addition, the grammatical tradition, rooted in antiquity (Walker, *Rhetoric* 311) and extended through the Enlightenment, divorced both

poetry and rhetoric “from notions of argumentation or ‘reason’” (Walker, *Rhetoric* 329), while the Renaissance and Romantic eras reduced the lyric to private, emotional, “prerational” self-expression (Walker, “Aristotle’s Lyric” 15-17). Although Walker concedes that “all poetry (and beyond that, all literature) is epideictic and effects persuasion” (“Jeffrey Walker Responds” 217), he ultimately characterizes contemporary poetry as merely “a minor kind of epideictic” (*Rhetoric* 330).

Scholars who, disagreeing with Walker, demonstrate contemporary poetry’s epideictic force emphasize epideictic conventions of display, self-display, and discovery. For example, Kneale shows how “the language of show or demonstration . . . becomes self-display” (34) in Coleridge’s “To the Autumnal Moon” through his use of personification or prosopopoeia to trope the poet’s own process of “constructing meaning” (45). Prosopopoeia displays personhood; as James J. Paxson explains, “Prosopon poein means ‘to make a face or mask’” (213) while prosopopoeia’s “opposite” rhetorical device, pragmapoēia, describes “the figural conversion of a human character into an object” (210), a metaphorical reduction “of a human agent into a nonhuman thing” (224). Like Coleridge, Dickinson and Frost display their speakers’ meaning-making processes through prosopopoeia, although they represent the almost-absent state of their speakers’ personhood. As Jost explains, such personifications may effect a process of discovery in readers who recognize both the speakers’ endangered personhood and the “*public knowledge*” that prosopopoeia and pragmapoēia may also be ways of thinking and of constructing identities in discursive contexts (322). Levinas suggests that such creative processes of constructing human subjectivity extend beyond fictional realms into our own lives and deaths.

## Rhetorical and Poetic Values of Death

For Levinas, the problem of loss defines human subjectivity and precedes any ontological question of being or presence. Death, as the loss of individual subjects’ own lives, is a threshold or defining mark of subjectivity in Levinas’s ethics. In “Time and the Other” (hereafter cited as “Time”), Levinas observes, “When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp” (41) and, thus, have lost the “initiative” (47) and “mastery” (42) that constitutes being as a human subject. Death leaves human beings with no agency and, therefore, no way of making meaning or of connecting and responding to other people. This human agency that death removes can also be threatened by suffering. Levinas invites us to identify suffering with death

insofar as both inhibit our human agency, although certainly to different degrees; in “Useless Suffering” (hereafter cited as “Useless”), Levinas describes suffering as “a backward consciousness, ‘operating’ not as ‘grasp,’” connection, or meaning, “but as revulsion,” which “rejects” meaning, “at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself” (91). Suffering undermines our ability to make meaning and connect with others, although not in the absolute way that death does. As Levinas describes, suffering’s inhibition of this agency is “unbearable” (“Useless” 91), an experience of utter passivity, and “[t]he humanity of those who suffer is overwhelmed,” rendering “the human being . . . the identity of a mere thing” (“Useless” 92). We lose human agency—and human subjectivity or personhood—in both suffering and death.

In “Desert Places” and “After great pain,” Frost and Dickinson represent such loss of human agency through prosopopoeia and pragmapoëia. Their speakers express a lack of emotion that signifies their inability to express their emotions, to connect with others, and even to assert their own personhood. For example, Frost’s speaker seems to recognize only absence, especially his own absence, in his memory of gazing on a snowy “field” (2):

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
 In a field I looked into going past,  
 And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
 But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.  
 All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
 I am too absent-spirited to count;  
 The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness  
 Will be more ere it will be less—  
 A blankee whiteness of benighted snow  
 With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
 Between stars—on stars where no human race is.  
 I have it in me so much nearer home  
 To scare myself with my own desert places. (Frost 1-16)

The speaker projects his own loneliness onto the snowy landscape, claiming he is “too absent-spirited to count” (Frost 7). He is absent from the landscape, which, itself a mere memory, is also in a sense absent. Most importantly, the speaker is absent to himself, recognizing his own fear

only in the final stanza as he admits that he is terrified of the blank, empty “desert places” within himself (Frost 16). The speaker’s focus on absence, especially his “absent-spirited[ness]” (Frost 7) and apparent loss of his own loneliness, which he attributes to the landscape instead of to himself, signify a loss of what Levinas call one’s “[ability] to be able,” the meaning-making agency on which personhood depends (“Time” 42). Frost’s speaker indirectly conveys his loss of this ability through descriptions of absence.

Dickinson’s speaker conveys similar losses in her lyric as she focuses on a liminal, “formal feeling” that follows “great pain” (1) and precedes “the letting go” (13):

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—  
The nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—  
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,  
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—  
A Wooden way  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—  
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go— (Dickinson 1-13)

The speaker’s depersonalized “formal feeling” (Dickinson 1) could collectively belong to “everyone,” as Mordecai Marcus notes (16), or “to no one” as Francis Manley claims (261), or to anyone individually, such as the reader. This stone-like “Quartz contentment” (Dickinson 9) seems, paradoxically, to be a weighty emptiness, an intense emotion that lacks substance, much like the “blanker whiteness of” (Frost 11) the increasing loneliness that Frost’s speaker recognizes in nature but barely acknowledges in himself. The sense of disconnection Dickinson’s speaker describes suggests the form of affect without content or connection to the person who feels it; it signifies the speaker’s inability to express herself, to connect with others, and even to assert her personhood. Both speakers indirectly convey a loss or inhibition of their meaning-making agencies on which, according to Levinas, personhood depends.

The speakers’ inabilitys to express their emotions and to connect with themselves invite mournful responses in readers, who may grieve the absences of affect in the speakers’ descriptions. This mournful effect may