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Other Men's Flowers
By SAM LEITH

Rhetoric, simply put, is the study of how language works to persuade. So any writer seeking to make a case, or hold a reader's attention - which is more or less any writer not in the service of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea - has something to learn from it.

If the classical orators have modern counterparts in the realm of the written word, pre-eminent among those counterparts are the authors of opinion pieces. Here is persuasion overt, persuasion front and center. The techniques that served Cicero will just as effectively serve modern writers of opinion.

Open a book of rhetorical terms, and you will meet a lot of gnarly looking Greek and Latin words. Apodioxsis and epizeuxis sound like diseases you wouldn't especially want to catch. But, pilgrim, be not afraid. The figures - all the different twists of language that rhetoric describes - are sometimes called the flowers of rhetoric. Think of these words as the botanical names for those flowers, and remember what Shakespeare said about roses and their names.

Using classical techniques is not, in itself, a different approach to writing: it's simply a way of thinking more consciously about what you're doing. Terms such as antithesis, which is the technique of setting two terms in opposition, are ways of labeling what any prose stylist does by habit and instinct. Like the bourgeois gentleman of the playwright Molière - amazed to discover in middle age that he'd been speaking prose all his life - you've been using the figures since long before you could name them.

If you're accustomed to thinking of rhetoric as dealing only with fancy language, think again. Rhetoric is present in the plain style as much as in the high. One of the best-known figures, erotema, the "rhetorical question," is in regular use: "What am I, - chopped liver?" Everyday language seethes with metaphor and figuration. The trick, in a formal context, is to use it effectively.

It does help to keep in mind that, as Aristotle wrote, you have three forms of power over the reader: ethos, pathos and logos. That is, roughly: selling yourself, swaying the emotions and advancing your argument. Any sentence you write should be pulling one or more of those levers; the best will do all three. Even apparent decoration works to a purpose - if a phrase is beautiful, funny or memorable, it is doing work on its audience.

First, consider the three R's - repetition, repetition and repetition. Richard A. Lanham's authoritative "A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms" lists no fewer than 36 figures of repetition covering everything from the repetition of sounds to the

repetition of larger ideas and arguments. So it's not a paradox to say that your repetition can be various. Repeat, but do not be repetitive.

An argument can be given gathering force by anaphora, for instance, where a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive sentences: "Big Tobacco will want to tell you X... Big Tobacco will want to tell you Y... Big Tobacco will want to tell you Z. But there's something you can tell Big Tobacco..." Its conclusion can be given a sense of roundness and inevitability with epistrophe - where the repetition comes at the end rather than the beginning of a sentence. But repetition applies at a subtler level, too. The memorable or resonant phrase, for instance, is often alliterative or assonant: "I like Ike."

A light touch is best: a thunderous 15-sentence run of anaphora might not be appropriate for an article on traffic measures in suburban New Jersey. Sprezzatura, or naturalness, is the quality to cultivate.

If a piece of writing feels like a unit, it lends its argument an impression, however spurious, of coherence. The more each clause or sentence relates to those around it, whether in parallel or counterpoint, intellectually or musically, the more it will feel like an organic whole. Syntax can do much of the work of sense.

The tricolon, putting phrases into groups of three, is perennially effective. Once you start to notice these - be they in newspaper articles, politicians' speeches or TV advertisements (that's an example right there) - the little monkeys are everywhere. Lists, in general, work well. Try enumeratio: setting out your points one by one, to give the impression of clarity and command.

Music matters, too. The effects of the tricolon, as of any number of other figures, are in some ways metrical. Think of how clusters of stressed syllables can sound resolute and determined. "Yes we can!" is three strong syllables. Persuasion operates as much through the ear as through the faculties of reason.

Prose does not scan like poetry. But it shares its effects. One of the most memorable lines in American history, for instance, is the clause in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." That, among other things, is an example of iambic pentameter.

Rhetoric, whether on the page or in the spoken word, is about patterns and echoes and resonances. Recently, Mitt Romney declared: "It's time for a president who cares more about America's workers than he does about America's union bosses." That's, arguably, a false opposition. But my point isn't about politics so much as about the way a ringing antithesis can sound.

The template is: "It's time for a president who cares more about [supposedly good thing] than he does about [supposedly opposite bad thing]." The sentence is an ethos appeal - "I stand for [good thing]" - disguised as a piece of argument. Note how

it is inflated for musical reasons by the extra syllables "he does about" and the repetition of "America's"; and how "It's time" lends a sense at once of urgency and of history's being on the speaker's side.

Whether history is on Mr. Romney's side has yet to be established. But it's clear that during his perambulations in the garden of rhetoric, he has been picking the flowers. So has his opponent. And so have the countless pundits whose commentary will swell blogs and op-ed pages over the coming months. Ask not what you can do for chiasmus, then: ask what chiasmus can do for you.

Sam Leith is a writer and critic whose latest book is "Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric From Aristotle to Obama."