

GIANLUCA SPOSITO

**GREAT
SPEECHES**

THE ART OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

intra

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Rhetorically Series

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ISBN 979-12-5991-444-6

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TWO PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

What is rhetoric?

Every one of us, every day, makes an unknown number of speeches, with different purposes: political speeches, email, closing argument in a trial, love declaration etc. And each of us wants to be convincing and achieve the goal.

What is less known is that - in all the cases listed above and in many more - there is an unconscious use of rhetoric. Rhetoric is everywhere, yet few know what it really is and where exactly it appears. The adjective 'rhetorical' nowadays identifies what is redundant, pretentious, useless: a 'rhetorical' speech would, therefore, be one that aims at effect and not substance, where the glitter of form seeks to embellish emptiness or, rather, to distract and lead away the reader or listener from that emptiness. A 'rhetorical' person is who has nothing particular to say but tries to say it with special effects.

So 'rhetorical' can end up labeling the even dishonest speaker, who of the use of that 'emptiness' has made a profession, seducing his neighbor.

The transition of rhetoric from science to 'meretriciousness' was the last mile traveled by what is and remains a noble art that we all use daily, unknowingly and without necessarily evil purposes.

Our written and spoken language is rich in rhetorical figures and patterns, carried out mostly unconsciously (but also often incorrectly). There's more: even when we think about what to say to someone, how to expound a concept, how to try to get a thesis of ours accepted, we use elements that

rhetoric has long identified and proposed as reference points for the speaker of every context and time. Knowing and knowing how to use rhetoric enables one to know how to organize one's thinking into a reasoned and persuasive speech (a persuasion not by seduction but based on rational argumentation).

Therefore, rhetoric is and must remain the art of saying, that is, of speaking and writing effectively and persuasively, in use by the ancient Greeks and Romans and then transmitted to later cultures; an art that makes use of certain expressions and constructs, known as rhetorical figures. Rhetoric is historically the art intended to enable the speaker to communicate, to effectively reach the listener (or reader) and convince them to agree to one's thesis.

But rhetoric is not only about the use of words. Rhetoric can be used starting from the creation of a speech to the oratorical performance in front of an audience: it is a science that not only provides tools for the construction of a speech but also regulates nonverbal and paraverbal communication (posture, use of voice and body, etc. – the ancient Romans spoke of *actio*).

Today communication, to be effective, must be based on the mixture in balanced doses of primary elements such as rhetoric, psychology, nonverbal and paraverbal communication.

Can rhetoric make history?

Yes, rhetoric has made it possible to enhance some extraordinary moments in history, or even to make some moments memorable precisely because of the use of words. This selection includes 54 famous public speeches from the past 150 years, listed in alphabetical order according to their authors. They range from the political speeches of Abraham Lincoln

to those of Churchill, Blair and Obama, as well as Roosevelt and Kennedy, and ending with Elizabeth II and Charles III. However, also great speeches on civic issues are mentioned: from Martin Luther King Jr. to Nelson Mandela, from Jose Mujica Cordano to Sidney Poitier and Greta Thunberg. Moreover, some Nobel Prize acceptance speeches: from Ernest Hemingway to William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, from John Steinbeck to Elie Wiesel and Malala Yousafzai. There is also one of the most famous motivational speeches ever, that of Steve Jobs, and the speeches of figures who also ruled history through words, such as Hitler and Mussolini.

For each speech it would have been possible to write a book about it; therefore, I have chosen single introductory notes on the context and its author. I am convinced that these are essential readings for an essential approach to rhetoric and its great products, belonging to very different historical (and other) contexts. Rhetoric has taught and can still teach today how to construct a discourse and how to share it with one's audience in a collective multi-sensory sharing experience.

This is the goal of great oratory.