Life can be frustrating. For others, not for me. I am thinking of “others” faced with me, the rhetor(ician). Let me explain this: so far I have lived my rhetor(ician)’s life by observing others getting caught in a state of “admiration.” Whenever I reply to the unthinking question “And what do you do?” with “I am a professor of rhetoric,” I wait for the reaction, I smile inwardly, sometimes pour myself a drink, and watch “admiration” enfold. Descartes: “Admiration is a sudden surprise of the soul that makes it focus its attention on objects that seem rare and out of the ordinary” (Les passions de l’âme, 2:lxx, my translation). When, adding insult to injury, my interlocutor tries to get things back on an ordinary track and persists, asking “I see [do you?], you mean [no, I don’t] like [bad start for a definition] ‘communication’ [here, substitute a string of annoying approximations, as you please]?,” I don’t loosen the snare but rather tighten the noose: “No, rhetoric, just as the word says.” And I see how frustrating life can be for those who think and believe they know what rhetoric is—including that peculiar brand of unconfessed pedants: English teachers. I am at my worst, of course, when I am asked, “In French?” (they assume I teach elocution at a charm school).

Indeed for Descartes “admiration” is one of the six architectonic passions. So, I make it my philosophical duty not to let my interlocutors off the hook on which they have snagged themselves. I should let go, I know, but I won’t. I want to exploit the kairos. The energy of “admiration” literally lies in “surprise” (and materially in Cartesian physiology); that is how the soul is “caught” unawares, forcing it to reset itself and its atoms, if it can. That energy (see how relentless Descartes is) is made of two components: novelty and forcefulness (“insofar as the impulse it triggers is powerful right from the start”). In sum: admiration has a knock-out effect, like a tennis backhand coming from nowhere and applied with full power right on contact, never mind the follow-through and all those courtly frills.
So, after a while I let the victims go, yet not without providing them, for the road, with one striking example of “rhetoric” applied to current news, so that no doubt be left in their mind that they are not dealing with something they can reduce to what they think they know but with something actually “admirable,” in sum “novel” and “powerful.” Life need not be frustrating.

For some time now I have been testing publicly the impact of this uncompromising proselytizing, and I have learned a great deal about perceptions of rhetoric among an educated public, which in France we call the “honest public” (the assumption being that uneducated folks are dishonest by mistake, while educated ones should know better). I write a regular column for a leading French online, public intellectual magazine, Les influences (www.lesinfluences.fr). My blog is called Le rhéteur cosmopolite (The Cosmopolitan Rhetor). During the recent French elections, Le nouvel observateur plus asked for my collaboration—which caused some stupor among readers but created somewhat of a fleeting sensation. I call a spade a spade. I am a rhetor and I am cosmopolitan. I refuse to take a leaf from Stanley Fish’s acribic blog in the New York Times, The Opinionator. I do rhetoric, not opinion. I am still hoping the Onion will run a spoof of Fish and call it “The Onionator.” Professor Fish is very smart indeed at peeling off onion layers of opinions, until what is usually left are the bitter tears of his contrite liberalism defeated by illiberal public arguments. In my own blog I never let my political opinions color my analysis: I also peel onions, but I do not expect anything in return (except fans, like a mysterious “Corinne,” who followed me from my previous blog on Mediapart, Les oies du Capitol [The Capitoline Geese], to Les influences when I got contracted).

My own opinions are private; they are long-standing prejudices that have hardly changed since I reached the age of reason, and they are unlikely ever to alter. Like ancient, imperious Gods they command me when I cast my ballot or get involved in politics. Otherwise I keep them in check. It makes for uneasiness, but that is the destiny of those who keep Sextus Empiricus on their bedroom pedestal. A commentator, on another site, chastised me on account of my “pessimism.”

Be that as it may, “Le rhéteur cosmopolite” led to a book (Paroles de Leaders, [2011]) and then to another (De l’art de séduire l’électeur indécis [2012]), as I watched the word “rhétorique” pass through phases of public “admiration” and become implanted, as it were, in current parlance. I say “current” because here again Descartes is right on the money when he describes who is more likely to be struck by admiration: “In any event, although the intellectually challenged are not by nature inclined toward admiration, it does
not follow that clever people are always prone to it, unlike those who in
general have enough common sense but not a very high opinion of their
own capacities" (Les passions de l’âme, 2:lxxvii, my translation).

Descartes, having lived in Holland where weighing gold was akin to
weighing thoughts to the smallest ounce, offers a fine observation of life
and of public life. The last part of his definition is, in my view, a rather neat
description of commentators on social networks and, to be frank, the rank
and file of journalists. So, I have been observing how professional media
persons or social media interjectors “admire” rhetoric, how they awake out
of the opiate slumber of “information” and confess “admiration.”

It all began early in 2010 when Sciences humaines, a respected monthly
mainly read by the teacherly professions, ran a two-page-long eulogy of my
Hyperpolitique (2009) titled “Un grand discours vaut mieux qu’une petite
phrase”; it carried a catchy center-page insert that read “Rhetoric was a Jesuits’
diabolical invention of persuasion.” An advance copy of the article (richly
illustrated by orators at full throttle in the old Third Republic chambers)
triggered commentary on prime-time radio (France-Inter [“Revue de
presse,” 26 Jan. 2010]) by an anchor who dedicated his program to “political
talk.” He addressed three ideas that he claimed came out of my book: that
in Britain public speaking is a like a tennis match, that in the United States
it is “soft and hypocritical” (!), and that in France it is a “theaterocracy.” My
telephone started to ring. Everyone listens to that program: it gives the
chattering classes something to sound smart about, for a day. I hardly rec-
ognized the arguments of the first chapter of Hyperpolitique but was keen
to see how the journalist (who attended a top school and is a philosophy
major) managed to summarize it against the grain of public opinion: Gallic
stereotypes are that British are underhanded, Americans pugnacious, and
the French clear thinking. Clearly, my argument about rhetorical cultures,
however bent by him to create controversy, had led him to revise his opin-
ions about universals of public speaking in democratic cultures (oddly, he
left out what I wrote about the German rhetorical world).

Then something unexpected happened, as the press awoke from its
information-induced opiate sleep—management journals and finan-
cial magazines began taking an interest in my book. Le nouvel économiste
(25 Mar. 2010), a leading, salmon-pulped, financial weekly, interviewed me
and ran an article titled “Le goût de l’éloquence” misspelling “rhétorique” as
“réthorique” (as did the French C-Span, LCP, in a ticker during a broad-
cast in which I was invited to comment on the Socialist Party’s primaries).
It gained momentum. “Rhetoric” was being adopted by business people
who, had they read analyses in *Hyperpolitique* about the “delirium” of “labor talk” and the rhetoric of trust or contract management, may have realized I was on their case and not on their side. It was my turn to be struck with “admiration.”

What made the surprise all the more novel and forceful was the fact *Le nouvel économiste* article, uniformly laudatory and actually well written (except for the displaced “h,” but copy editors are no longer what they used to be), appeared in its “Leadership and Management” section and placed the emphasis on “eloquence” in its title. It highlighted three key points or catchphrases set in inserts that, read in sequence, produced the following syllogism: rhetoric teaches that social life is a transaction of arguments, transaction is good, and thus rhetoric should be taught at school. I was stunned by the boldness of the enthymeme. Soon after, a professional newsletter for senior staff at state agencies, hailed “rhetoric” as a new tool for labor relations (“Rhétorique à la rescousse,” *Lettre du cadre territorial*, 1 June 2010). Rhetoric had reentered public awareness where I did not expect it, in that very audience who, we are so often told, controls and understands “the real world”: the world of finance, of demand and supply, of accumulation of capital and return on investment. Yet, not under the guise of rhetoric as such but still draped in the quaint nobility of “eloquence.” Striking such a pose is rather typical, I often find, of the conservative dowdiness of financiers who entertain obsolescent images of high culture, even when they collect cows dipped in formaldehyde solution—to them “eloquence” spoke of artful elevation and of cultural capital.

The grafting of “rhetoric” onto public idiom was taking and, to size up the change over the years, I simply needed to look back at what *Les échos*, France’s main daily financial paper, read by stock-exchange people, had written back in 2006 (in its supplement “Les enjeux,” Apr. 2006). A columnist had asked a rhetorical question, “How does a HR manager tell workers they are being laid off?” Her answer was a laundry-list of self-help tips in public address, appended with a substantial list of secondary reading—a motley of manuals, ancient and modern, among them my *Art de parler* (2003). However, my book is not a manual of persuasive writing. It is nothing like the unrivaled *Hodges’ Harbrace Handbook* (2009). It is not even a primer for public address—both are the sort of books French elite professionals, trained in *grandes écoles*, dislike and distrust and despise and abandon to the college-educated crowd. *L’art de parler* is a historical anthology of rare and, to the noninitiate, complex manuals of rhetoric. “Eloquence” does fit in *Les échos*’ readers’ idea of high culture and social codes of distinction, but it

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**PHILIPPE-JOSEPH SALAZAR**
is actually an unpractical notion if the purpose is sweet-talking workers
unions. As Les échos declared Art de parler “illuminating,” I wondered, “Of
what?” Not of “rhetoric” for the word “rhetoric,” let alone the concept, was
absent in that self-help article. I got an answer after the publication, that
same year, of my Mahomet (a history of narrative topoi about the founder
of Islam): two leading Arab philosophers, Malek Chebel and Abdelwahab
Meddeb (author of The Malady of Islam), reviewed it who acknowledged its
belletristic and cultural value but stopped hesitatingly at the doors of the
ivory tower, as it were—Meddeb just hinted at the possible, hermeneutic
value of “rhetoric” in public affairs (in this case, the debate about Islam in
France). Later on he and I had a lively public exchange. Putting the pieces
of the puzzle together, it became clear to me that it all evinced a desire and
a lack, that is, a lack of knowledge as to what the lack actually is or was.

By the time in mid-2011 that my blog had become a regular feature, its
essays were being taken up by other online magazines (often lifted without
even my knowing, always a good sign), and invitations to contribute else-
where had become routine. Paroles de Leaders was out. Mentions in the press
acknowledged “admiration,” spoke now of “rhetoric” in curious, somewhat
inquisitive tones—gone was pejoration. They responded to the novelty and
force of the surprise in two ways.

On the one hand, notably feminist or women writers wrote of “manip-
ulation,” describing me as “cantankerous” and as “filling [my] fountain pen
with Pastis” (Le Monde, 18 Aug. 2011) or (in an otherwise level-headed and
well-intentioned interview) as a master at explaining “wondrous jugglery”
(Terrafemina, 14 Oct. 2011): they played out stereotypes commonplace in
some feminist circles that men exert persuasive power through hectoring
or dazzling display or self-inebriation of speaking, while women’s rhetoric
is irenic and conversational and coactive (see my Gender Rhetoric [2009]
for contrasting views on the subject). On the other hand, leading maga-
zines mostly read by the financial professions spoke of “rhetoric” as a novel,
surprising, forceful, and desirable management tool (which, I guess, would
reinforce the just-mentioned stereotype). Here is a florilegium: for Les échos
(7 Oct. 2011) Paroles de Leaders is “ruffling and lifts the veil on the mystery
of leadership”; in L’express (16 Nov. 2011) the star column “Tendanceologie”
(“Trendology”) hailed this new approach on “how to become a leader.”
The September 2011 L’expansion Management Review, a quarterly of refer-
ence only sold by subscription, judged the book “indispensable.” The lesson
easily drawn, with hindsight, from these punchy reviews is clear: the medias
and their audiences no longer shunned the word and the idea of rhetoric
and gave rhetoric, properly spelled, a prime spot. I asked the marketing department at one of my publishers (Bourin) if they had a hand in it. “No, the financial press just likes what you write; it is new, and they see its usefulness.” Descartes was possibly correct in judging who is more prone to “admiration.”

I have taken part in a number of national television and radio broadcasts in which the word “rhétorique” was cast about generously, like aspersions at mass, yet not without an ever-so-slight hesitation, the sort one has when tasting a new dish, and I even discerned a twinkle of daring in the eye of the show host. It amuses me always to see the word rising on the horizon and popping up, not in derision or pejoration but as an intellectual evidence, a lack-filler.

If I have retraced this short history, a surrogate confession of information opium eaters and their discovery of rhetoric as a management and public affairs (ephemeral) panacea, the reason is not vanity. Rather, it has to do with identifying our place in the lack, with how, as rhetor(ician)s, we interact with public affairs, how we are placed.

The bracketed “-ician” is an indication of our unstable place, of an instability that should be, for us, a matter to ponder. Say “rhetor” and one risks confusion with “orator”—the risk is that popular perceptions will infer from the denomination itself our purported ability to persuade, as if specialists of rhetoric ought to be better shod than shoemakers when it comes to our articulating public views. And the same perceptions will also result in accusations of being “rhetorical,” manipulative, and too smart to be trusted, if it happens that, indeed, we are persuasive in matters of public policy. By contrast, say “rhetorician” and it places us in a verbal paradigm along side obstetricians, pediatricians, beauticians, that is, as professional practitioners (“praticiens,” as the French put it neatly). The label will cause surprise, but we will be at pains to explain what we actually do. Here is an anecdote: it has happened to me over and over again when paying a visit to a doctor that I have to tell the enquiring nurse at reception that “no, I am not a professor at the medical school, and rhetoric is not a specialty.” I get a quizzical look, as if I were trying to hide something about my “practice.” On another occasion, getting a visa at my local Chinese consulate, I had this lovely exchange, in globish:

Clerk: What is your major? [quick translation!]
Me: Rhetoric, as it says on my visit card. [silence and what I had never thought possible: a puzzled Chinese expression.]
Clerk: Oh, . . . what faculty? [think rhetoric, think topos!]
Me: Philosophy.
Then came a bright smile of recognition followed by this exclamation from beyond the looking glass: “Marx!” “Yes,” I said, and I was not lying as I had just finished a paper on the rhetoric of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (Italian version at http://www.rhetoricafrica.org/PDF/lalibertamarx.pdf) and was developing my thoughts on rhetoric as radical materialism (for the 2012 *Jornadas latinoamericanas de estudios retóricos*). The “-ician” lends respectability because it belongs to a recognizable paradigm and places us in a code: as Jakobson explains in *Essais de linguistique générale*, a paradigm has two main functions, to create a code of permutations and to permit metaphorical substitutions. This is exactly what the nurse and the clerk were doing: permuting me, placing me. I am now, officially, a “rhétoricien,” be that as it may.

In conclusion: rhetoric is not a science; it is merely a method, and a method that clears the way as it proceeds—this is the lesson at the very beginning of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the terrible lesson of the *hodos* and *hodospoïesis*: the path into/of rhetoric is already there, already mapped, already given, but in need of “affray” and “clearing” (a detailed analysis is to appear soon in a volume edited by Boris Wiseman (*Chiasmus in the Drama of Life*), under the title “Rhetoric χ Rhetoric, or Rhetoric’s Chiasm (Being a Unscrupulous Meditation upon Deleuze, Miro, and *Rhetoric* 1354a1–11”). Rhetoric is also a highly poetic way to handle the world as Parmenides’ poem tells us because it is essentially the study of singular cases, mirroring the fact that each speech act is unique, singular, “semelfactive” as I propose to call it. This may explain why management is becoming so interested in it: business, for all its strategic planning verbiage, hinges on events that are unpredictable and necessitate immediate response in order to minimize losses. Its major response, if not the most portentous, is usually to explain verbally “why this happened,” which “no one could have possibly anticipated.” Such events are indeed singular. If they were not, there would be automated, coded, recognizable and implementable responses, and Nobel prizes would not go to those who precisely try to affirm that there are regularities, or “cycles” as they are fond of metaphorizing it, when, in the face of reality, “management” is unable to identify them. In my chronicles, I try to adapt rhetorical idiom to precise, microscopic situations, semelfactive events in public affairs, across a large spectrum. I also try to show that on the basis of singular cases rhetorical analysis can be predictive. Yet I do so without any apology for the technicalities of language. I stand firmly where the lack is most acutely felt. One reviewer delighted at the word and the concept of “acousmatics” (how to repeat verily that which one has heard,
without questioning its veracity, hence creating verity—an idea developed by Henry Joly in his essay “Platon égyptologue” (1979) as a key notion for corporate speech.

There is no point, I believe, in circumventing or displacing our idiom to adapt to readers, that is to imagine what adaptation be of comfort to them. The public will, out of “admiration,” adopt some of our idiom and drop some of it. The risk, of course, is to see our idiom reduced to what Aristotle derided, technical manuals—although in an elite-meritocratic culture like the French this peril is lesser than in a self-professed classless culture where self-help is extolled over legacy. The greater risk however is to be ghosts in public life, except as speechwriters, ghostwriters indeed, who may later become “advisors” to news channels, and commentators on others’ speeches. I believe that, to stop being eaters of our own opium, we ought to size up the value of the semelfactive, to dare the predictive, and to pay attention to the multiplicity of life.