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When Hyperbole Enters Politics: What Can Be Learned From Antiquity and Our Hyperbolist-In-Chief

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INTRODUCTION: AN AGE OF HYPERBOLE

EVERYWHERE WE turn these days we encounter hyperbole—in the colloquialisms of every day speech, advertising, salesmanship, letters of recommendation, sports-casting, and not least in political discourse. This may be a good moment, then, to open a conversation between ancient and modern understandings of verbal “over-shoot,” as the Greek term for exaggeration might be rendered in English. The evidence gathered in H. Lausberg’s *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*¹ shows that while ancient rhetoricians agreed that hyperbole should be counted among the “figures of speech,” they found much to argue about: was hyperbole a violation of the Aristotelian middle course, hence an extreme to be avoided, or was it a legitimate form of augmentation (*auxēsis* in Greek, *amplificatio* in Latin)? Could diminution (*meiōsis*) also be regarded as a form of hyperbole?

In the interpretation of texts hyperbole poses a further difficulty—unlike simile, alliteration or some other figures of speech, it is “unmarked,” that is, it has no linguistic sign to alert the reader to its presence. Hyperbole likes to disguise itself as if it were going to a masquerade ball, presenting itself as simile or wearing metaphorical dress, or appearing not infrequently as litotes. It can sneak up on you and take you by surprise. The critic Longinus in *On the Sublime*, ch. 38, and some rhetoricians noted that hyperbole could be most

powerful when least recognized. Many ancient rhetoricians and some modern critics, however, have followed Quintilian, who asserted that “expressions (often hyperbolic), such as “storms of *public assemblies*, *thunderbolts of eloquence*, are used merely for ornament” (*Institutes* 8.6.7). In this view hyperbole is a conspicuous ornament used to embellish speech and make it more elegant and attractive, but today it is more often treated either as an excuse for an outrageous statement (as when the CEO of Cambridge Analytica characterized as “a certain amount of hyperbole” his suggestion of using prostitutes to discredit a political opponent), or as a euphemism for a falsehood (as when a politician promises he will eliminate the national debt—\$20 trillion—and his budget director shrugs the claim off as “hyperbole.”) The term seems to extinguish any feeling of embarrassment.

None of these understandings of hyperbole is simply wrong, but together they eclipse an alternative view, grounded in one ancient understanding of language, and corroborated by modern experience. In this approach language in general and hyperbole in particular are not simply a set of signs whose meaning is arbitrarily determined by social convention. Instead, they have their own nature (*physis*, as Isocrates says in *Panegyricus* 8) and hence their own power to arouse and motivate listeners. Hyperbole, viewed in this light, is a force in its own right, with the ability to give voice to otherwise unarticulated emotions, to intensify them, to push aside doubts and hesitations, and then to turn feelings into action. Language is power, and hyperbole, as an extreme form of language, provides great power to those who use it skillfully. These need not be the docile students of the rhetoricians; politicians sometimes seem to have an innate understanding of it. The extreme breed among them, the demagogues, are often the ones who know best how to put this extreme of language to use.

True, you don’t have to be a politician to put hyperbole to work. It is a favorite mode of speech among lovers, poets, travellers. Holy Men use it, too: Jesus of Nazareth, for exam-

ple, proclaimed that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Matthew 19.24). Almost everyone uses it at some point, except policy wonks whose soulless prose withers before its onslaughts.

When people use hyperbole they may be neither lying nor embroidering the truth to make it more ornamental. They exalt and intensify what they see as truth, make it come alive, and thereby rouse their listeners from apathy and distraction. Ordinary people, too, use it, “till the cows come home,” they say. That’s a happy metaphorical hyperbole, bringing the listener close to a place where homely experience and poetry meet:

‘I’ll love you, dear, I’ll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street.

‘I’ll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.’

(W. H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening”)

Hyperbole can bring speaker and listener to a joyous, exuberant meeting place. But there’s more to it than that, as several case studies help us see.

CASE STUDIES I: PERICLES’ OTHER FUNERAL ORATION

IN HIS *Rhetoric* (1.7.34, 1365a32) Aristotle quotes a hyperbole from a funeral oration delivered by Pericles. It’s not from the famous speech that Thucydides ascribes to Pericles in book two of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but it has its own claim on our attention: “Pericles said in his Funeral Oration, that the removal of the youth from the city was like the year being robbed of its spring.”

At first glance, the language seems straightforward. The hyperbole, as often, may not even be evident, since hyperbole is, as we have noted above, “unmarked.” Here, moreover, it is wrapped in a simile and expressed through a word play—“removal” and “robbed” in this translation are two distinct sides of the same Greek verb. These devices may pass by unnoticed, but the attentive listener cannot fail to observe the link between hyperbole and the emotions. The funeral oration is prose, but like many a poem it succeeds by giving voice to emotions that might otherwise remain unexpressed. These emotions may be of almost any sort, though the empathy implicit in Pericles’ simile is rare among them. Perhaps empathy lies at the very boundary beyond which hyperbole cannot reach.

The transaction between speaker and listener is not a one-way street, for hyperbole challenges listeners to do their part by recognizing the emotional equivalence between the death of loved ones and a year that goes directly from winter to summer. The consolation provided by the passage, in other words, depends not only on word choice by the speaker, but also on an interpretive effort on the part of the listener. The result is a memorable, powerfully empathetic statement expressing the feelings of its listeners.

In Pericles’ hands, hyperbole seems benign, but the power it evokes can easily be put to practical advantage, as can be seen when hyperbole enters the marketplace.

CASE STUDIES II: HYPERBOLE IN THE MARKETPLACE

HYPERBOLE PROVES its real-world effectiveness in the hands of a skilled salesman. Here is how a master of that art explains it:

The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyper-

bole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion.²

While this passage does not provide a specific example of “truthful hyperbole,” the strategy is clear: the salesman must first recognize the buyer’s fantasies, especially desire for something that will set him aside from the dull and the ordinary. Hyperbole then steps in, making what might otherwise seem routine, mediocre, or even shabby glow brightly in the imagination, for hyperbole can make everything seem superlative. It is the “*biggest . . . greatest . . . most spectacular*,” and plausibly so, for what is being offered is not a certain number of square feet, or a location at such and such an intersection, but a way of fulfilling fantasies. The property offered for sale now seems necessary, dazzling, essential. “I must have it,” says the counter party. After that, price is only a minor issue. The deal swiftly follows. *Caveat emptor*.

In such settings persuasion is achieved when fantasy joins with superlatives to awaken desire. When used by a mature speaker, superlatives are followed by explanations, justifications, supporting facts and arguments. But the jaunty, adolescent superlatives in this “truthful hyperbole” do not invite corroboration. The superlative helps the hyperbole succeed. This comes as no surprise to the classicist: after all, *superlatio* is the Latin word for hyperbole and *hyperbolē* is a Greek term for the superlative degree of the adjective. Superlatives are the bosom buddies of bravado and braggadocio. They help move hyperbole beyond salesmanship into the rough and tumble of politics.

CASE STUDIES III: HYPERBOLE ENTERS POLITICS

AFTER OBSERVING its success in sales and marketing we should not be surprised to find hyperbole entering politics. There too hyperbole can provide a powerful way to elicit emotions and put them to work. In politics, however, the hyperbolist is not dealing with an individual counterparty, but with a larger public, with collective emotions and needs.

Such an audience may, as Demosthenes recognized, be put off by the self-promoting bravado of the hyperbolist. He noted that it is “the nature of mankind to listen readily to invectives (*loidori*) and denunciations, while resenting self-praise (Demosthenes, *On the Crown* [18], sec. 3).

That recognition did not stop Demosthenes from hyperbolic self-praise, nor does it inhibit a modern successor who, for example, says he “will be the greatest jobs president God ever created.” Such a hyperbole may not turn supporters against the candidate because it is more than the politician’s familiar braggadocio. It is also a forceful statement of intent, capable of having a powerful effect on a mass audience. In a one-on-one setting the interlocutor might ask what plans and proposals the candidate has to offer, then proceed to assess them in detail, based on historical data and other evidence. The hyperbole bypasses all this, turning the moment from policy discussion into an assurance of commitment to job creation. Perhaps God himself will fill in the details. It’s the intensity of the commitment that counts. The effectiveness of such hyperbole may mystify the policy minded, but crowds often show an intuitive understanding of this manner of speaking, recognizing in it not an invitation to assess truth, falsity or plausibility, but a statement of unshakeable intent.

Hyperbole can also be directed against a political opponent, sometimes, as Quintilian recognized, sweeping an audience off its collective feet. In *Institutes of Oratory* 12.10.62 he points to a type of politician who will “exalt his style by amplification and rise even to hyperbole, as when Cicero cries, ‘What Charybdis was ever so voracious!’” (Cicero, *Philippic* 2.27.67).

Quintilian then waxes hyperbolic himself:

It is such a one that will bring down the Gods to form part of his audience or even to speak with him, as in [Cicero, *Pro Milone*, 31.85] . . . This [speaker] is he that will inspire anger or pity, and while he speaks the judge will call upon the gods and weep, following him wherever he sweeps him from one emotion to another.

Cicero had surely benefitted from the development of techniques of adversarial hyperbole by Demosthenes and some of his contemporaries of the fourth century BCE. It was in the preceding century, however, when political hyperbole first commanded attention.

Attack-dog hyperbole may be rooted in the genes of *homo politicus* but it seems to have come off the leash in Athens during the 420s BCE. By this time Pericles had died; there was no successor of comparable standing; annual invasions by the Peloponnesians had disrupted the Athenian economy and forced residents from outlying areas to crowd within the city walls; plague struck; hope faded that Athens' existing strategy could force the Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies to sue for peace. There seemed no alternative to war, hunger, and destruction. The increasing frustration is evident in the comedies of the period, for example, the chorus in Aristophanes' earliest preserved play, the *Acharnians* (425 BCE), and the angry jurors in the *Wasps* (422 BCE). In this setting a new form of political leadership emerged and with it a more powerful role for hyperbole. To be sure, most politicians, ancient and modern, use hyperbole to some extent, but it seems to have special appeal to this new breed of politicians called demagogues. The word is first attested in Aristophanes *Knights* (424 BCE) where it applies to a new figure on the political scene, Cleon. He is the archetypical demagogue, and a master hyperbolist.

Indeed, it may be best to view demagoguery, both ancient and modern, not as a set of policies or an ideological commitment, but as a form of discourse in which a distinctive cluster of gestures and speech acts—bombast, insults, praise of oneself, slanders of others—are all swept up in a storm of bluster. Going to the extreme, both in word and deed, is at the core of this discourse. In a 2018 article in the *American Scholar*, I compared the demagogue to a typhoon—hot air whirling around a moral and intellectual vacuum.³ Left unexplained, however, was how such bluster could prove so politically effective. Hyperbole now seems to me to provide

the answer, for it has the power to suck into itself the gullible and to smash any who stand up against it.

When such a politician starts arguing, hyperbole often turns vitriolic. This variety of hyperbole, which the Greeks called *loidoria* (often translated as “invective” or “abuse”), seems to have been a stock-in-trade of the demagogue. In this mode of speech an opponent can easily be represented as an enemy of the people, and as deserving swift condemnation. Paphlagon, the Cleon figure in Aristophanes’ *Knights*, comes on stage in a fit of *loidoria*: “By the Twelve Gods! Too long have you been conspiring against Demos. What’s this? A cup from Chalcis? That means a plot for Chalcis to revolt. You will be killed and butchered, you pair of scoundrels” (*Knights* 235–39).

A similar extremity of manner is twice ascribed to the demagogue Cleon in Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian war, first in his account of the severe measures Cleon advocated against Mytilene when it rebelled and was forced to surrender. Here Thucydides describes Cleon with a hyperbole of his own, calling him “the most violent of the citizens and at that time by far to the populace the most persuasive” (3.36.6). (The Greek drives the characterization home with rhyming superlatives: *biaiotatos . . . pithananotatos*.)

In the following book Thucydides recounts what happened when the Athenians managed to bottle up crack Spartan troops on an island near Pylos in the Peloponnese. The strategic advantage that Athens enjoyed as a result was sufficient to induce the Spartans to offer a peace settlement, but Cleon, it was thought, determined to hold out for a better deal, drove away the Spartan negotiators. It soon became clear, however, that it would not be easy to subdue the Spartan troops on the island. When reports from the field emphasized the logistical and tactical difficulties of such an operation, the Athenians turned against Cleon for rejecting the peace offer. He at first claimed the reports were fake news, but when that did not prove persuasive, he turned on the Athenian commanders for their failure to capture the Spartan troops. It

would, he said, in flagrant exaggeration, be easy, “if they had men for generals, to sail with a force and take those in the island, and that if he had himself been in command, he would have done it” (Thucydides 4.27.5, tr. Crawley).

That is soon followed by Cleon’s extravagant promise that he will go to Pylos and defeat the Spartans within twenty days. And he does, as Thucydides observes in another hyperbole of his own, noting that Cleon’s promise, “though full of craziness,” came true (4.39.3).

In the next century, Demosthenes, having learned, I suspect, from the attacks and slanders mouthed by Cleon and others like him, unleashed his own hyperbolic assaults on his enemies both domestic and foreign. When, for example, Athenians felt deeply threatened by Macedonian expansion under King Philip, Demosthenes used hyperbole as a way of rallying Athenian support for his policy of standing up against Macedon, saying of Philip: “Not only is he not a Greek, he’s not a relative of the Greeks; he’s not even a barbarian from any decent place. He is a damned Macedonian from a country where you could never even buy a good slave” (Demosthenes, *Third Philippic* [9], sec. 31).

Demosthenes’ pyrotechnics use a clever strategy to achieve their purpose—to move the Athenians from fear and distrust of Philip to willingness to march against his formidable new model army. It was reasonable for them to fear the Macedonians and to want to seek some compromise with them. But Demosthenes’ hyperbolic attack on Philip takes an audience threatened by Macedonian power and makes it imagine itself as buyers of slaves. They are empowered to reject any Macedonian as unworthy even of slavery in Attica. The implication is that surely this Macedonian upstart can be cut down to size by freedom-loving (and slave owning) Athenians.

Demosthenes could be equally vitriolic about his domestic opponents. He knew that his audience would not respond to a hyperbole by assessing its truth or falsehood. Its power came from its ability to express and heighten emotions. For example, when Demosthenes makes a hyperbolic attack on

his rival Aeschines, he makes his audience imagine what Aeschines might say in his own defense, then turns and dramatically speaks directly to Aeschines, providing in effect words for the jurors to express their feelings. He then proceeds, not offering evidence, but by an uncorroborated accusation about Aeschines' childhood, and expressing rage for the jury members to emulate:

With all this on his conscience the unclean scoundrel will dare to look you in the face, and before long he will be declaiming in sonorous accents about his blameless life. It makes me choke with rage. As if the jury did not know all about you: first the acolyte, reading the service-books while your mother performed her hocus-pocus, reeling and tumbling, child as you were, with bacchanals and tipsy worshippers.

(Demosthenes, *On the Mishandled Embassy* [19],
sec.199, tr. Vince)

The absence of proof in an attack such as this brings the passage closer to entertainment than to legal deliberation. While some modern politicians are content to compress their condemnation of an opponent into a succinct epithet ("dumb as a rock" Tillerson, "little Mario," "low energy Jeb," "slime ball Comey"), Demosthenes exploits the sonorous complexity of the Greek language, letting the scale of his attack correspond to the enormity of his opponent's alleged depravity. In this he was following a basic principle of Greek rhetoric: that the scale of discourse should correspond to the magnitude of the achievement, or of the crime, under discussion.

Aeschines was quite capable of speaking with equal ferocity, and with no more evidence for his accusations than Demosthenes provided for his:

Demosthenes, after he had spent his patrimony, went up and down the city, hunting rich young fellows whose fathers were dead, and whose mothers were administering their property. . . . A fatherless young man, half crazy, was managing the estate, Aristarchus, son of Moschus. Demosthenes, pretending to be a lover of his, invited the

young man to this intimacy, filling him up with empty hopes, assuring him that without any delay whatever he should become the foremost man in public life.

(Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* [I] sec.171, tr. Adams)

This is classic *loidoria*, an invective without corroboration in a setting where it cannot readily be refuted. Such attacks could prove highly effective, provoking a wide range of possible interactions between speaker and audience. For Athenian oratory was no passive affair. Audiences could heckle or interrupt a speaker, or revel in his assaults and spur him on to greater eloquence. A skilled practitioner of the hyperbolic arts recognizes the animosities, fears, anxieties, feelings of frustration and neglect in his audience and provides a specific target for them. The result can be the release of raucous enthusiasm. This is not often evident in the texts we have, that is, the revisions of actual speeches that ancient speechmakers published. But allusions in these texts to uproar (*thorrybos*) remind us of what Victor Bers demonstrated—that ancient Greek oratory could be a raucous interaction between speaker and an audience.⁴

RAGE, REGRESSION AND TEENAGERS

IN SUCH interactions hyperbole can express anger and then intensify it into rage, for when it enters politics it does not dally on the bright side of things but turns to darker emotions. A master of modern hyperbole shows how this can happen. Eager to assail his opponent for poor judgment in financial matters, he uses hyperbole, calling her “crooked Hillary,” and promising that, if elected, he will have her prosecuted. The crowd starts to chant, “Lock her up! Lock her up!” It is good theater, and good fun. Here they need no pedantic lectures on the niceties of the law. They play multiple roles simultaneously: law enforcement officer, prosecutor, judge, jury and jailor. That’s what it feels like to be in control. Empowering! They can shout out their frustration with elitists who have too long dismissed their grievances and scorned them as *deplorables*.

It seems at first as if they were shouting “USA, USA” at the Olympics, or cheering on their old high school football team to victory—except now it’s less about victory than about anger. The shouting delivers a delicious dose of dopamine and a chance to regress temporarily to an earlier and less responsible stage of life, before the development of the prefrontal cortex demanded control of every word and deed. The experience is all the more delirious if the aspiring hyperbolist-in-chief models adolescent behavior, presenting himself in vocabulary and gesture as a case study in arrested development. This, I suspect, is what it is like inside such a rally. Outside it seems dark and threatening; things teeter on the brink of violence.

Aristotle would understand, I believe, an event like this, because he recognized the links that bind together hyperbole, immaturity and rage: “There is something of the teenager (*meirakōdes*) in hyperboles, for they express themselves in the most intense manner. They are in raging passion when they speak” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.11.16, 1413a).

Teenagers may be prone to great swings in mood and expression, but not all fit Aristotle’s description. He has one in mind, as becomes clear when he goes on to cite *Iliad* 9.385ff., a temper tantrum by Achilles. Aristotle recognizes Achilles as a teenager, prone not just to anger but to rage (*mēnis*). His comment points to a reading of the *Iliad* as a coming-of-age story—a tale of a young male who is shocked out of his adolescent-like extremes of word and deed into genuine adulthood. His comment invites as well the recognition that hyperbole both expresses and intensifies emotions. Achilles eventually surmounts it; his own loss of Patroclus enables empathy for Priam’s loss of Hector. He grows up, as we can see: empathy is the mark of adulthood.

In real life, ancient or modern, one cannot wait for maturity to arrive, especially when the hyperbolist wields the levers of power. Responding to hyperbole, then, is perhaps the most urgent challenge in the study of political discourse.

RESPONDING TO HYPERBOLE

HYPERBOLE OFTEN breeds hyperbole. We learn that lesson on the grade school playground. If someone shouts an insult, it is best not to deny the accusation, nor to defend oneself, but to retort, "You're an even bigger one." More advanced students might analyze this as "retaliatory hyperbole," but the underlying principle is an old and familiar one. Like begets like. But what on a playground may lead to a momentary flare-up, when weaponized in politics can prove enduringly virulent. That might not be troubling if we could share the confidence of many rhetoricians that hyperbole in all its forms is mere ornament. But, once hyperbole enters politics it may strip off its disguises and let its real intent be clear—to generate power from raw emotion.

The natural response when this happens is to shout even louder and exaggerate even more outrageously. But the hyperbole that answers hyperbole may fall flat on its retaliatory face. Or, as the ancient rhetoricians warn, it may leave the audience cold. *Psychrotēs*, *frigidity*, they call it, noting that of all the figure of speech hyperbole was especially prone to this problem.

Retaliatory hyperbole presents, I believe, a further problem: it erodes respect for facts and argument. Focused on the emotions, it may join an opponent in substituting feelings for facts and whim for reason. Even when used by the righteous in the most virtuous of causes, retaliatory hyperbole can spiral downward, dragging civic discourse with it.

Aristophanes saw a related problem—what happens if retaliatory hyperbole succeeds in displacing the demagogue? The *polis* is left with an even worse hyperbolist. That is the issue in Aristophanes' *Knights*, at the start of which two slaves of old man Demos induce a loud-mouthed Sausage Seller to take on, outshout and displace Paphlagon, a manipulative slave of gullible old man Demos, the electorate. The defeat of Paphlagon, clearly an outlandish

Cleon figure, produces raucous merriment on stage, but gradually a problem becomes evident: the Sausage Seller can succeed only by being more outrageous than Paphlagon. Athens will, in effect, end up with an even worse demagogue. At a more general level, there is another problem with retaliatory hyperbole, for it can breed cynicism about the political process, if each politician is made to sound worse than the other. Aristophanes wisely steers his comedy away from such an ending. Instead he deftly taps into his audience's yearning for a truce with the Spartans. So he brings on stage Truce, personified as a beautiful young woman and new girlfriend for a rejuvenated—and reformed—Demos. No longer will he let himself be tricked by demagogues. He will take charge himself, start acting responsibly. The result is a happy ending accompanied, no doubt, by much merriment and laughter, but with a serious message, then and now.

If retaliatory hyperbole is not the answer, what is? There is no easy answer, because many frequently used remedies don't work. They may even make things worse. To label a statement a *lie*, even when justified, usually fails in part because it looks only at one of the parties in the transaction—the speaker; it does not address the question why listeners respond to it as they do. If only the liar seems to understand the intensity of listeners' needs and feelings, then only he can be trusted to respond to them.

The same is true with calling out exaggerations. It makes little impression on true believers if a politician's exaggeration is added to *The New York Times'* list of "Trump's Lies," or submitted to *The Washington Post's* "Endless Pinocchio." The corrections may backfire. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler showed that factual correction may actually strengthen some people's commitment to an idea or candidate.⁵ The "backfire effect" is to be expected when the initial statement or appeal is hyperbolic. After all, hyperbole derives its strength not from facts but from emotions. It often signals intent or commitment rather than established fact or forthcoming action. For exam-

ple, campaigning in October 2018, the President promised a 10 percent tax cut “next week.” The promise was patently impossible, but fact-checking simply drew greater attention to the idea that the President and his party were committed to cutting taxes. Those who point out the implausibilities and inaccuracies in such statements miss the point, since hyperbole, as we have seen, is not a matter of truth or falsehood, but of emotions given voice. People who find their hopes given expression through a hyperbole are likely to regard the speaker as someone who understands their situation and is committed to do his best to respond to it. Those who challenge him on factual grounds may be left looking pedantic, obtuse and unsympathetic. They “simply do not get it.”

Another kind of laughter, however, can be therapeutic in times of unabated hyperbole, as lovers of Aristophanes’ comedies and watchers of *Saturday Night Live* are well aware. Can comedy or satire or their visual analogue, caricature, take the further step of cutting the hyperbolist down to size? Perhaps that is too much to ask, but ancient comedy combined with literary theory may bring us part of the way. While most ancient rhetoricians did not spend time developing strategies to deploy against hyperbole, one thoughtful analyst, Demetrius, *On Style*, sec. 161, called attention to the importance of laughter and the link between hyperbole and comedy. While tragedy gravitates toward the other end of the verbal spectrum—toward irony—comedy not only goes after the braggart and the hyperbolist, it uses exaggerations of its own, caricature and parody of personal appearance, dress, gestures and speech patterns, to raise laughter against its targets. It delights in taking on the braggart, the *alazōn*. As the *miles gloriosus*, the *alazōn* is a familiar figure on the comic stage from Plautus to Shakespeare and beyond. The *alazōn* is also often to be seen on the political stage, ancient and modern.⁶ The key to dampening down his overheated rhetoric is not *loidoria*, *invective*, or other forms of hyperbole. Just the opposite: it is a variety of *eirōneia*, *irony*, that can extinguish these otherwise uncontainable fires.

True believers, to be sure, will never budge, but irony, properly deployed, can send the braggart skulking home in disgrace. A modern example may help make this clear. Lloyd Bentsen in a 1988 vice presidential debate responded to his rival's comparison of himself to John F. Kennedy by saying: "I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." The audience laughed and Dan Quayle's campaign never recovered.

There is no need, then, to try to shout out the *alazōn*; in fact, it is not a bad strategy to lower one's voice as an opponent's throat grows hoarse from shouting. To be sure, understatement with its concomitants, wry humor and mockery, is in short supply these days. Rare is the politician who knows how to wield it. Yet, it is perhaps the best recourse when political hyperbole gets out of hand.

Before using it, however, something else needs to be tended to. While hyperbole, as we have seen, can encompass almost every emotion, one, empathy, prefers to speak *sotto voce*. Indeed, it is often better communicated by body language, facial expression or gesture than by words. The hyperbolist, though, may find it hard to realize that empathy, or any other authentic emotion, is not to be shouted from the housetops.

Therein lies the opportunity. For, while the hyperbolist has bombast and braggadocio at his side, and can shout loud and hit low, without empathy his weakness becomes obvious. Sooner or later he will be recognized as little more than sounding brass, or tinkling cymbal. The ironist thereby can beat the hyperbolist at his own game, provided that empathy stands behind his irony. In that way the *eirōn* shows that he understands the emotions and circumstances that have given the hyperbolist his sway. That, I believe, is the only antidote likely to work against this infection of the body politic.

CODA: THE VALOR OF THE IRONIC VOICE

IRONY REQUIRES VALOR. When he realizes his pretensions have been exposed and his claims deflated, the hyperbolist can be counted on to attack, big time—very! It may help in such circumstances to recollect the story of Dieneces.

With the Persians closing in on a small cadre of Spartan troops defending the pass at Thermopylae, a man from Trachis told the Spartans that “when the Barbarians discharged their arrows they obscured the light of the sun by the multitude of the arrows, so great was the number of their host.” It was a frightening prospect for the vastly outnumbered Spartans, but one Spartan soldier, Dieneces, turned the report on its head, deflecting fear with insouciance and, “making small account of the number of the Medes, he said that their guest from Trachis brought them very good news, for if the Medes obscured the light of the sun, the battle against them would be in the shade . . .” (Herodotus 7.226). Dieneces does not dismiss the Trachian’s report, or label it a lie; he doesn’t do the numbers and prove it implausible for the arrows to eclipse the sun. Instead, he treats it ironically, making the exaggeration “of small account.” He counters hyperbole with its opposite, understated confidence. He chooses to be an *eirōn*, rather than an *alazōn*.

The Spartan warriors, to a man, stood their ground and died at Thermopylae. Yet, in a sense, Dieneces succeeded. If the intent of the Trachian’s hyperbole was to demoralize the Spartans before going into battle with a vastly superior force, Dieneces deflected it, as a strong man might flick off a fly. The hyperbole could not make them give up or run away. Dieneces died, too, but was honored forever after as the most valiant of the Spartans.

NOTES

1. Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, tr. Matthew T. Bliss et al. (Leiden 1998).
2. Donald Trump, with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York 1987).
3. W. Robert Connor, "A Vacuum at the Center: How a Demagogue Resembles a Typhoon, and What it Means for the Future of the Republic," *The American Scholar* (Spring 2018), 20–31.
4. Victor Bers, "Dicastic Thorubos," in P. Cartledge and F. D. Harvey, eds. *Crux* (Festschrift for G.E.M. de Ste. Croix; London 1985), 1–15.
5. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32.2 (2010), 303–30.
6. On the demagogue as *alazōn*, note *Knights* 290; on the contrast with the *eirōn*, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1108a.

