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# On Thinking Like a Roman: The Philosophical Tradition of Renaissance Humanism

Michael Mooney

## *I*

The passing from life of Leonardo Bruni, so we learn from an inscription on his tomb in Santa Croce, "caused history to grieve and eloquence to be silent, while none of the Latin or Greek muses could hold back their tears." Remarkable as this train of mourners was, one would think that also philosophy could have troubled herself. One in a line of learned Florentine chancellors, Bruni had led nothing if not a well-examined life, pondering as well as embodying the virtues of citizenship he prized, and among the works he left to posterity was the corpus of Aristotle itself, newly translated and arranged. Yet philosophy had no part in his wake, or her presence among the mourners was so discreet as to cause no one to take note of it.

If not even the death of Bruni, the lodestar of Quattrocento Florence, could work the sympathy of philosophy, should we

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wonder that Renaissance humanism as a whole should pass into history so little remembered by the noblest of all disciplines? Its artists and architects made indelible impressions, leaving behind new forms and techniques, and arguably new ways in which to consider their works; its social and political thinkers, faced with the ever-shifting arrangements of Church and State, found new or refined bases in human reason and will for the formation of polities; its historians and legal scholars broke the hold of Roman formalism and led their disciplines to the forms in which we now recognize them; above all its poets, orators, and philologists, newly conscious of the origin and growth of words and texts, laid the basis for the range of studies we now call proudly the "humanities." But its philosophers—were they too the pride of Renaissance humanism, and their ideas a part of its legacy?

In any conventional sense, the answer is likely to be no. The humanists produced no single towering philosophical figure, no Aristotle or Thomas, Leibniz or Kant, Wittgenstein or Russell. They devised no great system of thought, like Spinoza's or Hegel's, that is remembered as bearing the stamp of the era. They coined no single technical term for permanent deposit in the treasury of philosophical vocabulary. Their contributions to logic, it is now recognized, helped speed the development of scientific methodology, and their novel conceptions of such fundamental categories as place, force, and continuity prepared the way for the new physics of the seventeenth century; yet in the long view of history even these achievements, like those in "moral" philosophy, their professional *métier*, seem merely tentative or largely derivative.

If we are to find any lingering philosophical significance in Renaissance humanism, it seems, we must abandon the idea that philosophy is to be had only in a succession of remarkable figures and their well-etched systems, and must relax if not discard the sharp disciplinary definitions—the useful bias of the previous century and our own—by which philosophy is set off from the work of other scholars who also choose to think deeply, if less systematically, on "things human and divine." That is in any event the course I wish to follow here, not by examining the work of any Renaissance thinker in particular, but by attempting to trace out the darkest lines of a tradition of ideas, very old indeed, in which Renaissance humanism as a whole has its standing and its importance.

This lineage of humanism, or so I propose, is one of two great traditions of Western thought and sensibility, having a characteristic set of ideas and assumptions which, in the final analysis, are



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irreducible to those of any larger or grander scheme. The tradition took root in the formative years of Western culture itself and has evolved over the centuries through various permutations, down to our own day. I choose to call it the "Roman" tradition, in contrast to the "Greek"—terms nonetheless which have less to do with the biases of any nation or region than with forms or types of the Western spirit itself.

## II

In and beyond the marks of family, clan, and ethnos by which we also have our identity, and in and through the political and religious institutions which inform our values and actions, we recognize in the deepest reaches of our spirit a cluster of ideals or "excellences" toward which we all as Westerners almost instinctively strive. To Homer's Odysseus, the virtues of our humanity are three—comeliness of form, strength of mind, and beauty of words—each of which resembles, in its highest form, a godlike perfection. Though sometimes sought beyond all reason, physical beauty seems seldom to be ranked with the virtues of mind and tongue: it is perhaps too evanescent, or seems too much a given, too little achieved, to hold out its claim against the others. Between the perfections of knowledge and eloquence, however, we find in our history, as indeed in ourselves, a regular and often unfriendly battle for ascendancy. For who is it finally who commands the culture—philosophers and scientists, the intellectual elite who know and now arrange the structures of our world? Or is it the poets and orators, those who inspire, lead, and guide our society?

Walk the streets of New York City, that pinnacle of Western aspirations, and one finds this issue debated in stone. At the heart of Rockefeller Center rests the golden figure of Prometheus, portrayed in the very act of stealing fire from the gods, a worthy tribute to the kingdoms of business and technology which surround it; while in Federal Circle to the south of the Center stands a row of majestic court buildings, each inscribed with a more noble sentiment than the next, promising that justice is universal and blind, that truth will out, and that each shall have his own. In which of these monuments are we to glory? Or more precisely: in which of the two do we find the center of our culture, the signature of our best efforts? In which do we have our highest and proudest achievement?

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Consciously or not, the builders of New York have set out for us in graphic form the same tension of soul present in the elegant creation myth of Plato's *Protagoras*. Prometheus, we recall, was only one of the heroes in that great drama. Fitted out by Epimetheus with wings and hoofs, tough skins and special coloration, and given assorted means for nourishing and procreating themselves, the brutes of the earth were provided for well and made the human mortals—"naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed"—seem frightfully vulnerable by comparison. Thus Prometheus, in a bold act of genius, stole from Hephaestus and Athena the skills of the arts and crafts, together with fire, and gave these to man so that he might protect and preserve his species. Inspecting the result some time later, Zeus could rejoice at what man had achieved with his technical arts—houses and clothes, shoes and bedding, foods of every kind—yet he also discovered a pervasive tragedy: whenever they gathered themselves into cities for protection against the beasts, men devoured instead themselves, for they lacked the political wisdom that Zeus alone possessed. Thus Zeus sent Hermes to give mankind "respect for others" and "a sense of justice." And how shall I distribute these gifts? Hermes asked. As the arts were distributed—that is, on the principle that one trained expert suffices for many laymen? Or shall I distribute them to all alike? "Let all have their share," Zeus replied.

Asked to ponder the *Protagoras*, the Greeks and the Romans among us will differ sharply in their reactions. The Greek will linger in triumph on the words that tell of Prometheus' theft of fire from the gods, finding therein the promise of knowledge and power to the select of the race; the Roman, in contrast, will read further, nodding pensively at the news that Zeus, in a desperate effort to equip our kind for life in society, gave us in addition to fire a sense of justice, distributing it in equal measure to all. The Greek is not indifferent to the predicament of man in society, but he will try, as if on principle, to treat it as a technical or scientific problem. Seeing truth as the privilege of experts, he will look for a Philosopher-King to regulate our affairs. Or he will contemplate a system of natural law and deduce from it the principles of right living. Or he will turn the sense of justice into a science of justice, formulating its tenets and procedures and having them administered in secure, arcane ways. Or he will think out an ontology of society, a grand utopian vision, and from it devise a Five-Year Plan for the political economy. For the Roman, on the other hand, the path to a just society is altogether messier and more painful.



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As a common, not a reserved gift, he will argue, the sense of justice is concomitant with humanity itself, such that *our* history is *its* history. It may rely on knowledge and make use of techniques, but finally it is neither of these. It takes root in social urgencies, in the need to act when the facts are muddled or their meaning unclear, and the form it acquires, when finally it does, is given it in the songs of bards, the words of poets, the eloquence of jurists. Over time it is built up and collected, some of it written, some of it not, and in that form takes on authority and a noble name. That name is jurisprudence.

### III

Such, then, are the contrasting sensitivities of the Western spirit. On the Greek view, the apogee of human culture is science and abstract thought; on the Roman, it is eloquence and the prudence of law. As disjunctive as these views seem, rarely does either assert itself with absolute validity or give no credibility to the other, and there are instances to be found—the work of Aristotle being one—in which a plain effort is made to combine the two emphases. In the main, however, specific individuals, eras, indeed whole cultures in the West are marked by one of these two modes of sensing and thinking, and thus of ordering their actions. This is, I realize, a grand historical claim, one that I can do no more than propose here, for my concern at the moment is to lay out the case for the primacy of eloquence and jurisprudence, the characteristic bias of what I am calling the “Roman” tradition. To do this, however, I must first give some thought to the human experience of space and time, for it is in it that the Romans have the basis for their claim.

I am not interested here in the metaphysics of time and space, whether they form a continuum or an empty void, or whether they have an absolute or relational reality, or whether they are separate or correlative entities; I wish only to remark on how we are conscious of them and how we act as a consequence of that experience. For whatever the ontological status of space and time may be, our experience of them is neither simple nor univocal, but embraces at least two recognizable forms.

Routinely in our everyday life, and always in a scientific life, we experience and act upon time and space as measured or measurable quantities, as settled or fixed points within a structured universe. No sooner did Rhea produce a child, the myth tells us, than Chronos her husband would devour it. So it is that

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we speak of chronology, time that merely passes, one moment like the next, each arising only to be swallowed whole. This is the time of a ticking watch, a succession of homogeneous units, the kind of time that seems "physical" or external, the kind we need not internalize or be aware of, much less understand, but merely take account of in our plans and expectations. So also space on this account, which we do not experience as a place or even a cluster of places, but merely as size or dimension. This is the experience of space as expanse, as a definable stretch of territory or distance—acres, furlongs, light years. As with time that is quantified, space that is measured is public and reliable, as familiar to us as the furniture in our home, requiring of us only that we not ignore it when reckoning or moving about.

This first experience of time and space is of capital importance in our lives, for without it we could not schedule our trains, rendezvous with a friend, measure the pressure of our blood, predict our weather, or put a man on the moon. Our dependence on it is continuous if largely unconscious, and to the extent it fails us or we become incapable of it we are literally "disoriented," the proper subject of human pity if not psychiatric attention. "Snap out of it," we advise a daydreamer, while the schizophrenic who is inhabiting two "worlds" we must occasionally hospitalize as a danger to himself and society. The essence of measured time and space is uniformity or continuity, which makes of them "domestic" realities, completely reliable and predictable. Time that is measured has no surprises and in this sense is "timeless" or eternal, even as measured space is "placeless" or utopian, one spot like the next. They are as such the contours of *cosmos*, our universe as structured whole, and the necessary conditions for manipulating our environment in a regular and confident way. Because of them we can even seek to know our world through its principles or *archai*, to discover the process beneath all appearance and change, indeed the reasons for change itself. We call such knowledge *theoria*, science.

As necessary as this first experience of time and space is, there is every indication that we find it, in the end, intolerable, or at least insufficient; for however regular our lives or disciplined our minds, not every moment is the same to us, nor are any two spots alike. "That was a long lecture," a student will quip; "Too long," his friend will reply, and in that simple phrase tell us that time has quality as well as quantity. Time always passes, to be sure, but it also flies or drags, is full or is empty, and bears numerous other relationships to the lives it defines. Depression



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can flatten this experience of time, turning each moment into a replica of the other, but to a spirit that is truly alive a moment of crisis can never be mistaken for daily routine, nor will an hour spent in the arms of someone he loves be like that of any other. For time in our experience is not mere chronology; it is also occurrence or event, having consequence and particularity. It can even be unique. Space too, when experienced this way, loses the safe homogeneity it has as dimension and becomes a texture of relationships, a place. Set a vase of flowers on an empty table and you bring the entire room to life, giving it focus and coherence, every angle and line changed: the space that before was too readily an expanse is now defiantly a place, something to see and to come to terms with. A cathedral, a prison cell, a village square, a hospital room, any space that comforts or challenges or moves us deeply is so resolutely a place that it requires of us an effort of mind to think of it, like every space, as a bounded expanse, even as a child of five is not easily convinced that its mother is also simply a woman.

Experienced qualitatively, space and time become for us the places and events by which we mark our lives and know ourselves, and thus judge and are judged. Some places and events are so wholly private in their significance that they are idiosyncratic, known only by ourselves for what they are and for what we are as a consequence of them. We choose not to share them, or we have abandoned all hope of ever having them shared, and thus we enjoy or endure them in silence. Most places and events, however, are in some way shared realities, defining more lives than our own and taking on in this way a public or quasi-public character. Even one's birthday, which could never be to another the event it is to one's self, is the possession of those who remember and help celebrate it. One's death, on the other hand, is an event at all only to the extent that it creates loss and causes one's memory or accomplishments to be kept alive. Few places and events, of course, are regularly acknowledged or celebrated, but those that are give point to our public and social lives. We christen ships, throw housewarming parties, and surround a new government with pomp, circumstance, and the striking of medals. We set aside spaces as sacred or special and respect those that history has consecrated; we pilgrimage to spots of religious power, reenact battles *in situ*, and protect the ruins which contain the great moments of our past. Nature herself seems a part of the effort, her wonders and marvels—deserts and falls, canyons and mountain peaks—being “natural” places of legend and lore, fervor



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and refreshment, while the seasons of her life, reflected in those of our own, prompt us to establish, as if by instinct, elaborate cycles of secular and religious feasts.

Individually and culturally, our lives are "fixed" by places and events. We are caught up in them as if in a web, having in them our bearing and orientation. To be "in place" and a part of events, however, means also to be in flux, and thus in a kind of permanent jeopardy. Not only is the web of our own life's meanings essentially tenuous, as often vague and uncertain as it is clear and pronounced, but it is also a web that rarely if ever completely overlaps with that of anyone else, much less with the elaborate and complex set of rites and customs, verities and habits which form our society or stamp the culture we know as our own. Thus life in society is essentially tense, endlessly exposed—more sharply at times than at others—to the rise and fall of meaning. The hopes of one class or region are folly to another; the places and events that sustain one generation seem plain or trivial to the next. Even when stabilized within a society, meaning can be eroded from without, as when one people's values clash with another's, or when the conditions of life itself are altered.

Doubtless there are patterns in social change, as there are in history itself, and to come to know the principles of psyche, economy, and society is to achieve some purchase on our lives. In and beyond any success of this kind, however, we sense fundamentally the need to come to wonder about ourselves, to discover less the *archai* of our lives than their *topoi*, their significant "places" or moments, and to bring these findings to expression. Our habits and gestures are the silent beginning of this process, while diaries, letters, and autobiographies are its highest and most articulate form. Society at large has much the same need, and to similar result. Artists and songsters have social as well as personal visions, which they state in anger or in praise or with mere indifference. Pundits, commentators, and holders of public office are obliged or driven to speak freely about society, debating how its goals are adequate or lacking, and how its institutions serve or fail the public weal. Claimants, lawyers, and justices, if they are to have any success at all, must catch up the drama of an individual's life within a relevant context of society's resolve and experience; at their best they will reveal the demands of stated ideals or open new vistas on a culture's past and future—the accomplishment of the best biographers and historians. Most fundamental of all, citizens themselves give voice to their experience simply by the way they arrange their lives, acquiring new tastes and abandoning

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others, continuing or refining the mores of their parents, choosing to maintain or to reject the civic heroes and celebrations to which they were introduced as growing children. To come to word in this way means above all else to consider and judge the *topoi* or "places" of one's life, to seek out its strongest or most significant moments and bring them into some coherence. The knowledge achieved in this way is true and reliable knowledge, though it bears little resemblance to the knowledge of science. It is not uninterested in pattern, repetition, and formula, but it takes its focus in singular, concrete places and events. It is not the knowledge that conquers change or renders it harmless; it is the conscious innerside of change itself. Called by its most general name, this knowledge is *poiesis*, knowing by making, poetry.

#### IV

It is in the full, poignant sense of time and space that oratory has its origin, and with it the philosophical tradition I am calling the "Roman." "The ambition to speak well," writes Cicero, following an opinion of Aristotle, "does not arise when men are engaged in establishing government, nor occupied with the conduct of war, nor shackled and chained by the authority of kings. Upon peace and tranquility eloquence attends as their ally; it is, one may say, the offspring of well-established civic order." The "order" claimed here as the basis for oratory is anything but patient, dull, or complacent. It is an entirely active order of things, one in which men are thrown back on their own resources and made to feel responsible for the shape of their lives. "Order" and "crisis" are here coexistent, though the crisis is one of liberty, not of repression or of the very struggle for existence. Cicero makes this clear in the example he gives. After living for years under tyranny, the inhabitants of Sicily cast out the invaders and set about restoring their former way of life. Being acute and disputatious by nature, they sought the restitution of private property through legal argumentation, but the process they followed was careless and unmethodical. Thus two of their own, Corax and Tisias, drew up precepts and rules for making an argument, and so invented the art of rhetoric.

Even if apocryphal, the story serves well to show that rhetoric, as the logic of public discourse, is rooted in social urgency. We notice, first of all, how issues of time and space press upon the Sicilians, for in their initial liberation they are temporally and spatially disoriented. So long as the tyrants were in control, time



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as a social entity was suspended and the places that once gave texture and specificity to the Sicilians' lives were merged as if into a single, alien domain. Their lands, to be sure, remained familiar in their simple dimensionality, and chronological time continued its relentless course, taking its toll on all things natural, including themselves. But the places and events which before gave structure to their lives fell victim, with liberty itself, to the ways of the tyrants. With tyranny's end, all this has changed: places and events are again in their control and suddenly there is need to make connections with the way things were.

Every rhetorical act takes its start in an urgency of this kind. Always it is impelled by the single, insistent question, *quid sit agendum*, what is to be done? In an extreme sense, well exploited by the critics of our day, every moment of civil life is intrinsically rhetorical. But to the ancients who formulated rhetorical theory, three situations were paradigmatic: the court of law, in which two barristers (or a barrister and a judge) wrestle over the fate of an accused—and this they called forensic or *judicial* oratory; the political assembly, in which courses of state action are debated—*deliberative* oratory; and the public address, in which praise or blame is distributed or a view set forth on an issue of interest or controversy—demonstrative or *epideictic* oratory. In the case of our legendary Sicilians, the rhetorical situation is framed by the need they have to set the boundaries of one another's property. A simple resumption of the past is not possible, for the whim of the tyrants and the mere passage of time have altered the past beyond recognition. Fences have been removed and fields redivided; flocks have been combined or thinned; buildings have been destroyed or added to; implements have been lost or stolen; families have been changed through marriage and death; loyalties have shifted and memories faded; and in many other ways the past has been put beyond ready reach. Yet, for all its fragmented, almost mocking presence in the chiaroscuro image of it in current arrangements, it is the past that must be bridged if the new order of things is to be a just one. How is this to be done?

The Sicilians have that "sense of justice" that Zeus sent through Hermes to supplement our technical skills; indeed we may assume that it is available in equal measure to each of them, such that no one, by virtue of birth or status, has a superior moral imagination. As with every virtue, however, justice speaks louder in abstraction than in context. The voice it lacks in context must be furnished it by passionate but fair-minded men, each advocating a vision of what is, under the circumstances, rational, good,

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and proper. What one man asserts, another will deny; what one urges as appropriate another rejects as foolish or inequitable. In classical rhetoric, a situation of this kind is called a *causa*—a “case” from the standpoint of the adjudicators, a “cause” from that of the contenders. Like boxers squaring off, the contenders take their “stands” in the matter; thus rhetoric speaks also of the *status* of the case, the issue or issues that emerge from it and need to be decided. If the case is not plain, if the course of action to be taken is not immediately obvious to all who look at the matter openly, then it must be argued, each contender setting forth that idea of equitable action that seems to him most compelling.

What is at stake in the case is not merely the claims of the contenders, but also the shape of the community, its sense of things past, present, and above all future. Unlike a philosophical debate, in which differing opinions are tested for their logic, coherence, and supporting evidence, a rhetorical argument puts society itself to the test. The argument must of course be clear, consistent, and founded on valid testimony, but its final appeal is to a vision of social resolve and behavior, one that is forceful enough to persuade. In the case at hand, our Sicilians are concerned for their lands, but in the social rather than the physical sense. The properties they are contending for have a natural existence which is largely untouched by the words spoken over them and about them; what they lack is social reality, a clear, unequivocal relationship to the people who inhabit and cultivate them. That is a reality that can be brought into being through argument alone. The decisions the Sicilians reach may have a marginal, accidental effect on crop yield, productivity, and similar natural and economic realities; but their choices will effect themselves as a people in a fundamental way, both in the literal sense of giving legal reality to what is contended for, and in the higher, moral sense of defining their grasp of justice.

## V

The rhetorical act, then, is the formal act of society in crisis, the process through which it judges itself and determines its future. Structurally seen, the act is a contest of “things and words”—*res et verba*, in the classical phrase—of arguments drawn from the traditions of the people and the facts at hand and expressed in language that is forceful and effective. To have its effect, an argument must not only state a vision; it must also make it plausible, more consistent with society’s sense of itself than that of any rival vision.



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A society in crisis is not one in chaos. Chaos implies the absence of order and the consequent inability to conduct civil life. It can descend on a society through an invasion from without, either military or cultural, or it can be the result of an internal development, the gradual weakening of communication leading to a state in which, as the ancient saying had it, "there are as many opinions as heads." A crisis, on the other hand, is a challenge to consensus, the natural tugging at social bonds, at times quite severe, that is endemic to a vibrant culture. A healthy society is not one that avoids conflict but one that can channel it into established forms of argumentation and learn to abide by its outcomes. Such was the triumph of our ancient Sicilians, and because of it they were praised by Aristotle and Cicero as the model of a civil society.

The invention of the Sicilians was rhetoric, understood as the logic of argumentation, indeed of all civil discourse. Discourse of this kind is expressly nontechnical, a dialogue among citizens, not experts. What does it mean to reason with the people, arguing among the simple who cannot take in a complicated argument? It means first to canvass a situation to its full extent, trying to see it in all its many aspects and selecting from among them those which are most trenchant and persuasive. It means also to enlarge on particulars, to state as general maxims the opinions one's listeners hold about their own situations. And it means finally to catch up one's argument in stirring images, in language that can so much embrace one's self, one's listeners, and the shared situation that all are impelled to act effectively and as one. Discourse of this kind is indeed a showing of reasons (*logoi*), reasons that reveal the particulars of the case and appeal to the common sense of things. But it is more: it is an affective bonding between speaker and listeners. Through the demeanor of the orator (*ethos*) and the emotions he evokes (*pathos*), justice is seen and felt, and only thus truly known.

The *res* or "things" of an argument are the facts of a case illuminated by relevant "places" (*topoi*) in a society's life. In a genuine controversy, both the facts to be emphasized and the "places" to be invoked are matters of choice, requiring the keenest judgment of the orator; if the facts are obvious and the sense of society is clear, the case is plain and need not be argued. The precedents for a case—the customs, laws, habits and decisions that precede it—are, by definition, "authoritative," being the marks of society's prior achievements, its "just prejudices," as Edmund Burke put it so well. They are innately powerful, bearing

the weight of past triumphs, and must be reckoned with as the simple facts of society. Equally powerful, though differently so, are the facts of the case, the unique set of circumstances that somehow confront a society and its accustomed ways, demanding attention and adjudication. An alleged crime, a civil conflict, a social crisis, a political debate—whatever describes the challenge at hand—it must be dealt with through argument and action.

Argumentation reveals itself as a process of construction, the artful adaptation of facts to precedents and of precedents to facts. This process, moreover, is not merely mental; it is social, and thus it is bound to language (*verba*)—to images, gestures, and words. Language is the necessary bridge between precedents and facts. To be sure, a precedent—a maxim, an aphorism, a sentence, a law—is itself language, but it is frozen language; its words confront us as authority. A fact is equally stubborn, claiming a peculiarity that resists all classification. Both the precedent and the fact stand within the flow of living speech, which in turn reflects a society's *sensus communis*. It is thus to language, more precisely to metaphor, that the orator turns, to language that is at once familiar and fresh, seeking that linguistic bridge between present and past that will be recognized as most "apt." In this process of selection and construction, victory goes to the ingenious, the contender who can so marshal "things" and "words," ideas and language, as to say what is—at the moment—"called for," suited to the occasion, fitting and proper, appropriate and decorous, and so advance the cause of public life. His victory consists in having shown that his own sense (*sensus proprius*) of the relation of the facts and the precedents better conforms with the sense of society (*sensus communis*) than that of any opponent.

The outcome of the process of argument is the *sententia*, the judgment reached or the opinion advanced. Though pronounced in the context of an individual case, such as all instances of oratory are, the *sententia* has a universal character, an authority reflected stylistically in its brevity. Usually one sentence in length, a *sententia* literally punctuates a discourse, bringing it to a point and a close. Here thought and language interpenetrate, reinforcing one another: the last expression is the most thoughtful, and the last thought is the most expressive. In the context of law, the *sententia* is particularly poignant. A "sentence" in court is both language and idea, both *verba* and *res*, each commanding authority. To "pass sentence" means both to "render judgment," thus bringing a process of reasoning to a close, and to "make a statement," thus adding a text to the stock of public language in which culture has



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its identity. As a spoken judgment (*judicatum*), a sentence holds authority (*auctoritas*) and so orders the life of a people; as a norm of social existence, it becomes precedent (*praeiudicium*) for further cases of its kind, such that future plaintiffs must build their claims with reference to it.

Like hermeneutics, then, rhetoric too has its circle. It deals in matters of deliberate human action, the truth of which must be established through language. In cases of law, the reality of a deed is only then constituted when set within the context of justice and social values. In political debate, a proposed action becomes real only when fitted by its supporters within a polity's sense of its heritage and its dreams. In these instances, moreover, language—particular, chosen words and images—participates in the making of truth. The legal status of the accused is established through argument, and one case becomes precedent for the next. Political action is shaped through debate, the outcome of which is the basis for future deliberations. In such a wise, as the ancients liked to say, “reason itself is written down,” giving standing and identity to the culture whose voice it is.