

All in All (More or Less): Rhetorical Considerations in Literature, Thought, and Experience. Walter Jost.
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It is virtually impossible not to like this book. Its openness, its generousness in entertaining alternative perspectives, its frank call for engagement even to disagreement are **winning even where one wishes to object**. Imagine a dorm-room late at night, only crowded with philosophers, rather than sophomores--literary critics, history-of-ideas men, and the like--talking, proposing, animadverting, tilting at each other with arguments about the nature of the world, the epistemological difficulties involved in representing it, the ontology of each other's ontology, then talking and proposing and animadverting some more, and you can get something of the picture. There is so much good-natured jousting here, such give and take with real and imagined interlocutors, **an appreciation of the plausibility of what everybody maintains**, such that quiddity runs into liquidity before returning to quiddity again, and you find yourself staying up late into the night long after you should have put your arguments to bed. The five hundred plus pages of this book keep on going. But so, each page turning up another connection, forging a further association, they keep us going, keep us as an us in our varied tempers and ways of seeing. Consciousness becomes self-consciousness, positions are positioned in a pluralistic context, and relations maintained just when one might have thought it better, if only to preserve oneself as a self, to break them off. To put it in fine, *All in All (More or Less)* is a rhetorically masterful book by a **believer in the almost moral virtue of rhetoric**, a believer in the very act of rhetorizing, whose belief comes pretty near to convincing you to lay aside all those prejudices that you may hold—that, if you are a philosopher or literary critic, you surely do hold--about rhetoric being just precisely what you need to resist if you are going to philosophize or criticize honestly.

Jost's ambition is, as we might put it, breathtakingly modest. It is an **ambition to modesty**. His goal is nothing short of a **complete rehabilitation of the long tradition of rhetoric, a defense against the suspicion that has attached to it**, ever since Plato attacked the sophists, that rhetoricians do not believe what they say. But, then, he founds his defense not on a refutation of that suspicion, but on its very grounds. Internalizing it, he reconstructs doubt of the truth of rhetoric's populist pleadings as wariness, a cautiousness about overweening truth claims which rhetoric, in its lack of any stronger foundations than what people think, knows from the beginning. In effect, rhetoric, in Jost's way of taking it, is not about winning friends and influencing people but about reminding writers or speakers that they, too, are but persons and, at their best--why not?--friends, so that they should be careful about what they claim—about how strong their claims are and how far they go. What has come to be known across the humanistic disciplines as the “linguistic turn” is taken by Jost as a sort of Copernican revolution requiring a thorough shift of perspective. Accordingly, with Wittgenstein and Cavell, **he holds that the aspiration, say as in analytic philosophy, to a finer adaptation of the logic of our language to the language of the universe is a mistake**. With them, and with such a pragmatist forerunner as William James, **he notes that truth is not something language can properly be thought of as pointing to, because language, in the modern era, has become our truth itself**. But then, with a fine humanist caution, he adds, in effect, that such a truth should be written with a lower case “t,” for as the truth of language in all its variety of expression, it is subject to comparison of your way of speaking with mine, **to negotiation** between us, to working through. And it is just rhetoric, as he demonstrates in a tour-de-force of transvaluation, that has the resources for the job. What might, in the old regime, have been conceived of as an attempt to convince, becomes thinking, in the new. **Communication**, the traditional province of rhetoric—and in the academy, we might add, of professors of rhetoric and composition, as they are usually called—**becomes, in Jost's treatment, writing, the province of**

professors of literature. We might even say that rhetoric becomes poetics. And in fact, reading *All in All* sent me back to reading Aristotle's *Poetics* and especially his *Rhetoric*, about which Jost is especially illuminating as he reanimates classical terms, deformalizes them for the sake of "ordinary"—as in "ordinary language"—use, de-hierarchizes and, even, democratizes. In Jost's adaptation, logos is routed through topics and tropes, without which, he reminds us, no argument can, any more, have a reasonable purchase. Concepts **are understood as** what he calls "paracepts," abduction as having **as much weight as** induction or even deduction. Every syllogism **is really** an enthymeme, an Aristotelian middle point, as it seems to me, between the certainty of logic and the thoughtlessness of today's pure "memes." And, perhaps most of all, metaphors **take the place** of propositions, as "seeing-as," in a term Jost borrows from Wittgenstein to good effect, **replaces** seeing.

Ethically and, though he doesn't invoke it, politically speaking, what Jost really calls for—a call of moment for the moment—is **a little less dogmatism and a lot more judgment**, which rhetoric is especially well equipped to develop because it is furnished with so large and so refined a set of devices for generating the examples through which, finally, judgment is learned. After all, as Kant put it, judgment is that for which no rule can be given. For Jost, accordingly, it is the **rhetoricians**, with the flexibility of their way of thinking, their attention to the occasion, to analogy, to proportion, to the exigencies of this time and that place, learned in self-conscious address to audiences always situated in this time and that place, **who are the best possible teachers**. In rhetoric, alternative ways of seeing and expressing all have potential value. Neat distinctions give way to the nearness and farness of affiliation. What appear as peripheries to one center may be central to other peripheries. Projecting multiple maps along different axes, attending to byways as well as highways, **rhetoric gives us the fullest view of the terrain of an inquiry**, preventing any premature arrival at a conclusion by imperious assertion of some overriding point or hasty moral.

All in All (More or Less). That is the meaning of the title: the lesses and mores of any understanding give us the all in which we live, and the clarity of the all that emerges from the book's so rigorous delineation of the fuzziness of mores and lesses is its strength. Still, as the oxymoron of clear fuzziness suggests, it is also **the book's weakness**. The argument between Aristotle and Plato about rhetoric **cannot altogether be modernized away. Dematerialize Aristotle's domains, as Jost does, all one wishes**. Yet in the multiplicity of his descriptions, in his careful attention to different modes and manners, **a chiming with Aristotle's fragmentation of human experience remains**. So, too, demystify Plato's idealism. Yet a modern-day idealist cannot help but wonder if so clear a description of what we do understand as Jost achieves **does not beg the question** of what we should. **Simply said, can a moral ever not be hasty?** Or as Emerson put it, "I would write whim on the lintel of my doorpost. I hope it is more than whim at last. But we cannot spend the day in explanation." There is a good deal of fuzziness here, too. I do not know precisely what counts as an Emersonian day, whether it includes or excludes the night, for example. Yet I know that I must spend it one way or another, and whether it be resting on the couch or cleaning out the garage, sooner or later I will have to decide which. In plainer terms, if multiplying examples is how we learn to judge, at some point judgment must be rendered, and this means not more or less but making less one's more itself.

The problem is evident in the way Jost takes the duck/rabbit figure that Wittgenstein uses to illustrate the idea of seeing-as. Jost understands it as a perfect example of the legitimacy of multiple ways of seeing, and so it seems to me, too. Yet Wittgenstein's further, and considerably disturbing, point about the figure is that, duck or rabbit, **you cannot see them both at the same time**, and that is, I think, **precisely what Jost wishes to do. Perhaps, even, confuting Wittgenstein, that is what he does manage to do**. But this has consequences. For I am willing to grant that what I see is but what I see, and that you, with equal legitimacy, may see something else. I am willing to go

further, perhaps even further than Jost goes, and grant that your seeing what you do is what guarantees that it is I who see what I do, *for otherwise what we see might be just what might be seen without either of us bothering to look*. More broadly speaking, that I am I and you are you is possible only because we form an us, the bedrock premise of rhetoric, especially of rhetoric rehabilitated as Jost rehabilitates it. But, then, to take up the perspective of us myself is to negate both the self and community, threatening the very virtue of seeing-as, a threat that appears, to varying degrees, in the **three texts** that Jost offers as exemplars of what a rhetorical mode of analysis can yield.

Here the least problematical case is the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. Her view of what might have been or, better, of what, in the presence of its unfulfillability, as she renders it, still is, makes her a fine example of what Jost calls “low modernism.” This is a kind of writing which takes the linguistic turn not as an occasion for deconstructing language’s claim to truth but as a ground, rather, for pluralizing it. And, indeed, the characteristic wistfulness or longing of the modern lyric, its experience of different times and different places in the here and now of the lyricist, turns rhetoric into poetics by internalizing it, as I have been arguing Jost shows. Or, in a parallel formulation of Roman Jakobson’s, **it turns rhetoric into poetics** almost by definition by projecting the axis of selection of its topics and tropes onto the axis of their composition. The road not taken, in the famous phrase of the poet about whom Jost has written a fine book, is weighed equally with the road that has been taken. There is no need to judge here. Or, to speak historically, we might even think of Jost’s low modern lyric in dialectical terms as Shelly’s sublation of Sidney’s definition of poetry, legislating everything by, in effect, **affirming nothing**. Jost’s readings of Bishop are compelling. But as an argument for the general applicability of a rhetorical frame of mind, they seem like a kind of special pleading.

Hence what Jost has to say about *Twelve Angry Men*, the movie version of a play about a New York jury sitting in the case of a Puerto Rican teenager accused of murdering his father, only exacerbates the nagging uneasiness I have felt during the several times that I have watched it. Jost gives us an incisive analysis of the currents and crosscurrents, the backing and forthing among the jurors as they deliberate. Rhetoric takes center stage as he parses their indirections and asides, which as propositions about the nature of reality have very little foundation, but which stand on the basis of the experience and temperaments of the speakers' ordinary life. Here, continuing to talk is especially commendable. As first only one, and then more and more, of the jurors refuse cloture, a near unanimity about what must have happened is replaced by the plausibility of different accounts of what might have happened, and the jury votes not guilty, a clear victory for justice in the circumstance of prejudice in New York against Puerto Ricans. And yet, putting aside that circumstance, what has the jury really done? Not guilty is not the same as innocent. The very nature of the American legal system means that a no judgment is equated with judging. The vacating of an opinion is represented as an opinion. Not being able to agree about what happened is represented as a consensus about what did. In some other, oppositely charged circumstance, this would be a defeat rather than a victory. And the movie, it seems to me, has something of a bad conscience about this and so loads the dice. The juror with the strongest opinion, played by Lee J. Cobb with characteristic intensity, is an outright racist, and the hero of the piece, the initial holdout, says repeatedly "I just don't know." That the holdout is Henry Fonda, who plays the part with characteristically graceful equanimity, and that his name is only given in the last frames of the movie, say much about the difficulty. Charisma becomes the property of mild manners. In a sort of negative dialectic, a no one becomes a one. And in Jost's third text, just the question of ones and no ones emerges most problematically of all.

Here a little personal history may be in order. With almost every other middle-schooler for whom it was required reading, I disliked *Ethan Frome* from the first. What I think I thought, and what I came to think more firmly as I read other of Wharton's books, was that Wharton doesn't really know the rural characters of *Ethan Frome* (or of *Summer*, either) in the way she does those of *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. Jost has helped me to understand this opinion with much greater clarity. As I've intimated, helping you to clarify is one of the great strengths of Jost's work. But we cannot spend the day in clarification, either. Or, rather, such clarification doesn't make me think that my opinion is only a prejudice, as in *Twelve Angry Men*. It doesn't change my mind, and that Jost thinks it should, that he would surely think such an opinion as the one I have is, mostly, prejudice is something I find particularly troublesome. In effect, the meta-level of reading of *Ethan Frome* which Jost seeks, quite explicitly, to provide, **his eschewing—even his castigation--of interpretation of the book** in favor of an openness to the conditions that make interpretation possible in the first place, an openness which he takes as the book's real theme, becomes a kind of closedness of its own. **Hence his objection to a frequent critical distaste for the story's grimness.** Hence, especially, his objection to Lionel Trilling's reading of it as morally benighted, an exercise in what Trilling calls sociological "nothingness." As Jost points out, nothingness is just exactly the great granite outcroppings that are the life of the rural New Englanders Wharton says she wishes to portray. Grimness is their inarticulateness. But thus it is the meta-consciousness of the author whose articulateness **redeems the nothingness** that, in their grimness, the characters never quite understand. **Nothing is what they know, insofar as they know anything.** In fact, **from the point of view of knowing, they just are nothing, while allness is reserved to the all-knowing author,** a no one in her own turn, from the point of view of the world of the story, precisely because she does know all. And here, as in *Twelve Angry Men*, as it seems to me, a sort of bad conscience about the situation is admitted in the figure of the narrator, whom Jost reads as the

mediator between author and characters, but which reads to me rather less like mediation and more like condescension.

Well, perhaps I am prejudiced, after all. Call it class prejudice. Or, to return to where we began, call it the old prejudice of a literary critic against rhetoric. Maybe, literary critic and rhetorician talking to each other, we could compromise. Perhaps, between opinion and prejudice, opinionated is the better word. Reading Jost leads to such reflections. Withal, I must say, I have learned more from *All in All* than from any other critical work I have read in many years. I have had to think harder because of it. What better recommendation for reading could there be?

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