In the opening scene of the movie *The Graduate* a Mr. McGuire puts an avuncular arm around the Dustin Hoffman character and says, "I just want to say one word to you. Just one word." Yes, sir? "Are you listening?" Yes, I am. "Plastics." [Pause] Exactly how do you mean it? "There's a great future in plastics. Think about it. Will you think about it?" Yes, I will. "Enough said: that's a deal."

So nowadays the avuncular word to the wise is "rhetoric." There's a great future in rhetoric. Furthermore, unlike plastics, rhetoric has also had a great past, the twenty centuries during which it was the educator of the young and the theory of speech in the West -- as the classicist Werner Jaeger called it, "the first humanism," the "rhetorical paideia." The three and a half centuries of modernity since Bacon and Descartes have been in this respect an interlude. "We are still bemused," notes Richard Lanham the historian of rhetoric, "by the 300 years of Great Newtonian Simplification which made 'rhetoric' a dirty word, but we are beginning to outgrow it" (forthcoming, ch. 2, p. 27; cf. Lanham 1992). British empiricism and French rationalism have had a long and glorious run. The revival of rhetoric has been explicit since the 1960s in the study of literature and speech. But a sense of how to do things with words has spread now to other inquiries, to philosophers ruminating on speech acts or linguists on the pragmatics of conversation.

Rhetoric in the late twentieth century has had to be reinvented in ignorance of its past. Yet the mathematician who reflects on the standard of proof in topology or the economist who notes that the Federal Reserve Board is a speaker with intent or the political scientist who wonders amidst his regression equations if politics should after all be reduced to public opinion polls (Barry 1965; J. Nelson 1983) are practicing rhetoric. When they reflect on their reflections they are practicing, to say just three words to you again -- are you listening? -- the "rhetoric of inquiry."

When Kenneth Arrow was asked by George Feiwel what criteria he uses to judge competing theories in economics he answered:

> Persuasiveness. Does it correspond to our understanding of the economic world? I think it foolish to say that we rely on hard empirical evidence completely. A very important part of it is just our perception of the economic world. If you find a new concept, the question is, does it illuminate your perception? Do you feel you understand what is going on in everyday life? Of course, whether it fits empirical and other tests is also important.

Feiwel 1987, p. 242

Surprisingly the passage is quoted by Mark Blaug as demonstrating that Arrow is a Lakatosian (Blaug 1991, p. 505). Its prose meaning, though, is that Arrow, like us all, is a rhetorician. He seeks persuasion, through introspection, through a sense of the social world, and through fully identified best linear unbiased econometric tests, too.

The very word "rhetoric," though, makes it hard for moderns to understand what they are talking about. Like "anarchism" taken to be bomb-throwing or "pragmatism" taken to be unprincipled horse trading, rhetoric is a noble word fallen on bad times.

Rhetoric has since the beginning been defined in two ways, as I have said, one narrow and the other broad. The narrow definition is Plato's, made popular in the nineteenth century by the Romantic elevation of sincerity to the chief virtue. "Rhetoric" in the Platonic definition is cosmetic, hiding a disease under paint rather than providing a cure. Journalists use the cosmetic definition in their news stories and philosophers use it in their seminars. When the newspapers want to speak of obscuring blather and thirty-second spots on flag burning they write "Senate Campaign Mired in Rhetoric." The philosophy seminar uses the word "rhetoric" to characterize the meretricious ornament obscuring the clear and distinct idea. Thus even W. V. Quine, in an untutored entry for "Rhetoric" in his personal dictionary of philosophy, calls it "the rallying point for advertisers, trial lawyers, politicians, and debating teams" (Quine 1987, p. 183), without noticing that even in such a sneering and Platonic definition it is the rallying point also for philosophers.

In Plato's language "rhetoric" is associated especially with democratic institutions, such as assemblies or law courts, disdained by
men of taste. "You attempt to refute me," says Socrates in the Gorgias, "in a rhetorical fashion, as they understand refuting in the law courts ... But this sort of refutation is quite useless for getting at the truth." Or in the Phaedrus, "he who is to be a competent rhetorician need have nothing at all to do, they say, with truth in considering things which are just or good, or men who are so, whether by nature or by education. For in the courts, they say, nobody cares for truth about these matters, but for what is convincing" (Gorgias, 471e and Phaedrus 272d). Compare Gorgias 473e-474a: "Polus, I am not one of your statesmen... The many I dismiss" (cf. 471e; 502e on rhetoric as mere flattery); and Phaedrus, 260a, 275e, 277e, 267a-b, 261c-d, 262c, among other places where Plato expresses his contempt for law courts and democratic assemblies as against those who know. The attack on rhetoric has more than a little anti-democratic coloring.

If rhetoric is defined thus as ornament it is easily left to the "god-damned English professors" or advertising flacks. The setting aside began with Peter Ramus in the sixteenth century, who disastrously reaffirmed the Platonic separation of mere ornament from deep philosophy. As Lanham notes, "If you separate the discipline of discourse into essence and ornament, into philosophy and rhetoric, and make each a separate discipline, it makes them easier to think about. Thus begins modern inquiry's long history of looking for its lost keys not where it lost them but under the lamppost, where they are easier to find" (ch. 7, pp. 6-7). Another professor of English has warned against sneering at the "mere" rhetoric: we must "ward off the sensation that words are nothing but words when they are actually among our most substantial collective realities" (Petrey 1990, p. 37). Our politics, for example, is a set of speech acts and speeches about speech acts, and is easily corrupted by bad rhetoric. "We are only men," wrote Montaigne, "and we only hold one to the other by our word." (I:9).

The other, broad definition of rhetoric is Aristotle's, in The Rhetoric, I. II. 1 (to quote the Kennedy translation), "an ability, in each [particular case], to see the available means of persuasion." Of course the Greeks, ever talkers and fighters, distinguished sharply between persuasion (peitho) and violence (bia), an opposition finely discussed by Kirby (1990). Their literature is filled with speeches of persuasion weighing against the violent alternative. King Priam of Troy, prostrate before Achilles, pleads eloquently for the body of his son, linking in his final words the instruments of persuasion and of violence: "I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children" (Homer, Iliad XXIV, line 506). The Athenians at the height of success in the Peloponnesian War sneer at "a great mass of words that nobody would believe," mere rhetoric. They tell the Melians, their victims, that as a matter of realism in foreign policy — compare the rhetoric of Henry Kissinger and the 1960s movement to "realism" in international relations — "the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel" (Thucydides, V, 89). The Athenians proceed to kill all the men and sell the women and children into slavery, an abandonment of sweet persuasion they live to regret.

All that moves without violence, then, is persuasion, peitho, the realm of rhetoric, unforced agreement, mutually advantageous intellectual exchange. It would therefore include logic and fact as much as metaphor and story. "Logic," as logicians have been making steadily clearer in the century past, is not an unargued realm. Logic can be Aristotelian, scholastic, first-order predicate, deontic, modal, relevant, multivalued, informal, intensional, counterfactual, epistemic, paraconsistent, relevant entailment, fuzzy, and so on and so forth through the various ways that people can formalize what they are saying. The linguist and logician James D. McCawley says that "only through arrogance or ignorance do logicians palm off any single full system of logic as unchallengeable" (McCawley 1990, p. 378). Likewise "fact" is not to be determined merely by kicking stones or knocking tables. That a fact is a fact relative only to a conceptual scheme is no longer controversial, if it ever was. Kant knew it; so should we. Studies of science over the past few decades have shown repeatedly that facts are constructed by words.

There is nothing shameful in this logic and fact of scientific rhetoric. As Niels Bohr said, "It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature... We are suspended in language... The word 'reality' is also a word, a word which we must learn to use correctly" (Moore 1966 [1985], p. 406; but not all people are gifted at every part of argument; Bohr, gifted at metaphor, could not follow the plots of his beloved movie westerns, and would bring someone along to whisper explanations in his ear). And Heisenberg: "Natural science does not simply describe and explain nature; it is part of the interplay between nature and ourselves: it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning" (1959, quoted in Berger 1985, p. 176). That is to say, appeals to experimental finding are as much a part of a broad-church definition of rhetoric as are appeals to the good character of the speaker. Mill's logic of strict implication is as much rhetoric as is the anaphora of Whitman's poetry. Wittgenstei
says, "Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination" (1945 [1958], p. 4). In this definition a science as much as a literature has a "rhetoric."

When economists look at something, say childcare, they think of markets. "Childcare" — which to other people looks like a piece of social control, or a set of buildings, or a problem in social work — looks to economists like a stock certificate traded on the New York exchange. By this choice of metaphor they are driven to identify a demand curve, a supply curve, and a price. If the economists are of the mainstream, neoclassical kind they will see "rational" behavior in such a market; if they are Marxist or institutionalist or Austrian economists they will see somewhat differently. But in any case the seeing will seem to them to make ordinary sense, to be the way things really truly are.

A rhetorician, however, notes that the "market" is "just" a figure of speech. Yet a serious rhetorician, or a serious philosopher of science, will not add the "just," because metaphor is a serious figure of argument. Noting the metaphors not merely another way of saying that economics is approximate and unperfected. Economists believe that metaphor comes from the fuzzy, humanistic side of the modernist world. A model in economics comes to be called a metaphor, in this way of thinking, if "the statement can be tested only approximately" (thus David Gordon 1991). But the inverse square law of gravitational attraction is also a metaphor; so is Einstein's generalization. It is well known that the Romantics assigned metaphor to the realm of art, distinguishing an imaginative from a scientific faculty, as though different organs of the brain. The literary critic Francis McGrath has argued that the distinction cannot be sustained (McGrath 1985). Boyle's Law shares metaphor with Shakespeare's 73rd sonnet: metaphor, McGrath argues, is as fundamental to science as to art.

Models are metaphors, that is all. So in other fields: "the mechanistic, ... the organismic, the marketplace, the dramaturgical, and the rule-following metaphors have all played a significant role in psychological research of the past decades" (Gergen 1986, p. 146). "The market" is a commonplace, a locus communis, a topos — a place where economists work. The rhetorician's metaphor here is locational. In the rhetorical way of talking since the Greeks the metaphor of a "conversation" is a topos for the language game across the playing fields of economics (Klamer and Leonard 1993 explore metaphors in economics more thoroughly, with reference to the now-large philosophical literature; and see McCloskey 1985a).

The conversational figure of speech suggests the Similarity Argument: that the economic conversation shares many features with other conversations differently placed. Any scientific conversation has much in common with, say, poetic conversation, as is demonstrable in detail beyond rational patience. The linguist Solomon Marcus listed fully fifty-two alleged differences between scientific and poetic communication (rational vs. emotional; explicable vs. ineffable; and so forth), and after much thought rejected them all as crudities (Marcus 1974). He noted that there is as much variation within scientific and poetic communication as between them.

The attempts to distinguish the artistic and scientific uses of metaphor presume that the categories of European thought around 1860 cut the universe at its joints. The English professor Richard Lanham argues at length that "nothing but confusion has ever come from the effort to fix the poetry–prose boundary" (Lanham 1974, p. 65). Attempts to distinguish art and science do not seem to work, though from the best workers. Thomas Kuhn, for example, noting truly that "we have only begun to discover the benefits of seeing science and art as one" (1977, p. 343), nonetheless attempts a distinction. He argues that beauty in science (a differential equation with startlingly simple solutions, say) is an input into the solution of a technical problem, whereas in art the solution of a technical problem (contrapasso in representing a standing figure, say) is an input into the beauty. But at different levels of the art and science different work will be done. An economic scientist will work like an artist at a technical problem to achieve beauty; but then the beauty at another level will work to solve a technical problem. One might stand better amazed, as a physicist famously did of mathematics, about the unreasonable effectiveness of aesthetic standards in science. The physicist Tullio Regge remarked to Primo Levi, the chemist and writer, "I liked the sentence in which you say that the periodic table is poetry, and besides it even rhymes" (Levi and Regge 1992, p. 9). Levi responded, "The expression is paradoxical, but the rhymes are actually there . . . To discern or create a symmetry, 'put something in its proper place,' is a mental adventure common to the poet and the scientist" (pp. 9–10).

The one distinction between art and science of which Kuhn half persuades me is that art continues to converse with dead artists. Physicists, notoriously, do not work in the past of their discipline. And yet: biologists are still conversing with Darwin, economists with Adam Smith. Even this most persuasive demarcation seems fuzzy and useless. One can ask of the cleverest of demarcation
criteria, so what? In many of the activities of artists and scientists you can see and use the overlap. What is the corresponding usefulness of demarcating science from art?

Logic, for example, is by no means the sole preserve of calculators. The English Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century were addicted to logical forms, forms that were viewed as figures of speech by writers still educated in rhetoric. John Donne’s “Song” (1633) begins with a redactio ad absurdum (“Go and catch a falling star, / Get with child a mandrake’s root / ... / And find / What wind / Serves to advance an honest mind”), turns then to an inferential argument (“Ride ten thousand days and nights ... / And swear / No where / Lives a woman true and fair”), and finishes with what an economist would call an assessment of a low prior probability (“If thou find’st one, let me know; / ... / Yet do not; I would not go, / Though at next door we might meet. / ... Yet she / Will be / False, ere I come, to two or three”).

Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” (1681) is the type of an argumentative poem. The argument is of course economic: had we but world enough and time, my Lady, I could court you as your value warrants, to satiation; but time is scarce, and life especially; the rate of time discount (as the modern economist would say) is therefore positive; and the optimal consumption plan is therefore to seize the day. Marvell makes his appeal relentlessly and smirkingly: he plays with a convention of rational choice and mocks it, as language games have a tendency to do with themselves. (Irony for this reason is called by the literary critic Kenneth Burke the “trope of tropes”.) The economist plays no less within a convention when drawing on inference (N = ten thousand days and nights) or time discount (t = Deserts of vast Eternity), or when making little jokes to other economists about “islands” in the labor market or how the data have been “massaged.” The flatfooted among economists and poets lack this sense of irony about arguments. They pen lines like “The coefficient is significant at the .00000001 level” or “I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree.”

Similarity is not identity. Economics may be like poetry in this or that important respect, but plainly it is not the same. At another level, the likenesses between stocks and childcare will allow the topos of The Market to work, but there are differences, too, that will figure sometimes. At still another level, academic poets have different conversations from greeting-card poets. And all poets differ in other ways from economists, however poetic the economists may be.

Economics, for example, is not poetry just to the degree that a piece of economics invites what the critic Louise Rosenblatt called an “efferent” reading (from Latin effero, “take away”) as against an aesthetic reading (1978, pp. 25-28). That is, one expects to “take away” something useful from an article on the New Jersey income-maintenance experiment. The article is not read for itself (though recall Marcus’ experiment and take care: some economics is read for the aesthetic pleasure, and could hardly give any other). As Oakeshott put it (1959 [1991], p. 525), “poetic utterance ... is not the ‘expression’ of an experience, it is the experience and the only one there is” in the voice of poetry.

It is sometimes argued therefore that economics and other sciences, though using metaphors, use them in a different way from poets. The philosopher of science Cristina Bicchieri, for example, in a penetrating comment on my “poetics” of economics, argues that “A good literary metaphor should be surprising and unexpected ... Scientific metaphors, on the contrary, are to be overused” (1988, p. 113, my italics; compare Oakeshott 1959 [1991], p. 528: the poet’s “metaphors have no settled value; they have only the value he succeeds in giving them”).

Well, yes and no. The economist A. C. Harberger tells the story of a cocktail party at his house in the early 1960s, when Gary Becker, a brilliant student at Chicago, was working on the dissertation that became Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education (1964). The party was well along, but Gary as usual was sober and serious, and always, always talking economics. He came up to Harberger and remarked out of the blue, soft drink in hand, “You know, Al, children are just like consumer durables.” It was a poetic moment, unexpected certainly to Harberger (who in fact was an expert on consumer durables, but had no idea that recreation might fit the category). True, as Bicchieri says, Becker intended the metaphor “to be overused,” which is to say, to become part of the dead metaphors of the field; and it has. But at the moment of creation – like a poem once alive that becomes a cliché – it was anything but dead.

And on the literary side Bicchieri and other philosophers who want to give scientific metaphors a special “cognitive” goal quite separate from poetry are overstating the strangeness of poetry. They are adopting without realizing it a romantic literary criticism that puts the poet outside the routines of conversation, the poem being “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling,” taking its origin from “emotion recollected in tranquility.” But of course poets, even Wordsworth, in fact talk largely about poetry, quoting each other’s
metaphors. The coin of poetic tradition is well worn. Some good poems contain clichés like “the coin of poetic tradition is well worn.” What makes the poem work as “the activity of being delighted in the entertainment of its own contemplative images” (Oakeshott 1959 [1991], p. 527) is what is done with the clichés (like what I did just now with the cliché of worn coins, or in this sentence the convention of not referring to one’s own clichés in academic prose, or in this clause with that of not engaging in tiresome reflexivity, or in the last clause with that of not disabling the reader’s vexation by admitting that it is “tiresome,” and so forth). But good science is like that, too. Good science like good poetry can take utterly routine metaphors and, as Harberger is fond of saying, “make them sing.” Periods of classicism, in which a poet or scientist seeks originality within settled metaphors, are non-poetic or non-scientific. Think of Alexander Pope or Lord Kelvin.

Still, to be less provocative, take a conversation more obviously similar to economics, one which is wholly efferent (maybe), economic journalism. Thinking about its metaphors and contrasting them to economics itself still proves useful. Economic journalism is written sometimes by journalists with no academic pretensions, such as Leonard Silk, Robert Samuelson, John Greenwald, Louis Rukeyser, and David Warsh, but also by academic economists gifted in this way, such as Milton Friedman, J. K. Galbraith, and Lester Thurow, or academics-turned-journalists like Peter Passell. The common reader is liable to think that such writings are academic economics “translated” into plain English, in the style of popular science. Without prejudice, they are not. (Which is not to say that economic journalism is easy or that it is inferior to seminar talk: anyone who could imitate the books by the financial journalist who writes under the pseudonym “Adam Smith,” for example, would be justly rich; few academic economists are.)

The journalistic conversation runs on particular dramatic conventions, hinging on evil, suspense, and individuality. William Blundell, a feature writer for The Wall Street Journal, gives as “the major commandment” for newspaper reporting: “For Pete’s sake, make it interesting. Tell me a story” (Blundell 1988, p. xii), and uses the old gag about the ideal Reader’s Digest piece to make the point: “How I Had Carnal Relations with a Bear for the FBI and Found God.” In the storied talk that market people use to dignify their work a market is “excited” or “depressed,” overrun with bulls or bears, silt with cutthroat competition. “How I Had Business Relations with IBM for the S.E.C. and Found Competitiveness.” Businesspeople are portrayed in a story by
side of the trade, the selling side. Economists see around and
underneath the economy. Underneath it all (as the economists say, in
their favorite metaphor) Jim Bourbon of Iowa trades with Tatsuro
Saki of Tokyo. A Toyota sold by Japan pays for 2,000 tons of soybeans
sold by the United States. But at the same time a Japanese and an
American consumer are gaining soybeans and an auto. One kid gets
the other kid’s pet frog in exchange for giving up his jackknife. Both
two are better off. If we look on nations in the way we look on kids
making such exchanges we can see that both nations win a little
something.

Trade and development are in the economic metaphor positive
sum, not zero sum. The economic metaphor suggests a different
attitude towards trade than that of Friedrich List, the German
theorist of the German customs union in the early nineteenth
century, or Henry Carey, the nineteenth-century American theorist
of protection, or Lester Thurow and other recent Jeremias of
American decline.

Talking in such a rhetorically self-conscious way about a piece of
economic journalism is not just a rhetorical trick for attacking it. The
point is that all conversations are rhetorical, as I have said, that none
can claim to be the Archimedean point from which others can be
levered once and for all. The neoclassical economists who would
disagree with Thurow, such as his colleague at Massachusetts
Institute of Technology, Paul Krugman, use metaphors, too, of
humans as calculating machines and rational choosers. The neoclas-
sicals say that the human situation is rational choice, the maximiz-
ation of an objective function subject to constraints. Their metaphor
is less thrilling perhaps than the economy as a struggle between good
and evil or as the final round of the National Basketball Association
playoffs; but it is no less metaphorical on that count. The rational-
choice model is the master metaphor of mainstream economics,
enticing one to think “as if” people really made decisions in this way.
The metaphor has disciplined the conversation among neoclassical
economists – the discipline is: if you don’t use it, I won’t listen – and
has produced much good. To it we owe insights into subjects
ranging from the consumption function in the twentieth century to
the enclosure movement in the eighteenth. Yet, to repeat, it is a
metaphor.

The neoclassicals (I am one of them) are very fond of their
metaphor of people as calculating machines. What is problematical is
the “positive” and “objective” status they ascribe to it. It was not
always so. Ambiguity and contention surrounded the triumph of
calculating choice as the definition of economics, as did the triumph
of the computer analogy in psychology, and it was by no means
always regarded as an innocent analytic technique. More than a
century ago William Stanley Jevons found the calculating machine
persuasive on the non-positivist grounds that it fitted with
Bentham’s calculus of pleasure and pain; Vilfredo Pareto, too, cre-
dited it in the early years of this century with psychological signifi-
cance.

The neoclassical conversation about the logic of choice, despite the
centripetal force of a mathematics teachable to all, has itself tended to
break into smaller groups. The new classical macroeconomist has
enchanted many young economists, with their lust for certitude. The
neo-Keynesian, once himself lusty, holds back, finding solace in tales
of Akerlof and sayings of Sen (Klamar 1983b, 1984). The other heirs of
Adam Smith diverge more sharply from the faith. Even when
educated in neoclassical economics, for example, the Marxist econo-
mist will object to the neoclassical reduction of the social to the
individual; the Austrian economist will object on the other hand to
the aggregation of the individual in the social. The Marxist prefers a
conversation about the class basis of work; the Austrian prefers a
conversation about the ineffable individuality of the entrepreneur.
The mutual overlap of these conversations is large by the standard of
their overlap with non-economic conversations – you can get any
economist to talk to you about the entry of new firms into ecological
niches, for example, or the adequacies of a monetary theory of
inflation – but the lack of overlap is large, too, by the standard of
what it should be.

Speaking of conversations being more or less similar yet having
different notions of how to persuade will make a monist angry. A
good monist-detection device is to say to him “Truth is plural” and
watch the color of his nose. The monist, though, has had his way for
too long in the modern world, traveling about from conversation to
conversation instructing people in the law. “Intelligence,” he says,
“must be measured in a single number and be used to stream school
children.” “The writing of history is solely a matter of gathering
pre-existing facts from archives.” “Economics must not use question-
naires, because any behaviorist knows that these might be falsely
answered.” “Economics will only be a real Science when it uses
experiments such as a withered branch of psychology once depended
on.”

The new pluralist and pragmatic and hermeneutic and rhetorical
conversation about the conversation “weaves a web of significance,”
in Clifford Geertz's phrase, around the talk of economists. The new conversation in economics is only imitating what the economists themselves actually do with their stories and metaphors when they talk about the Federal Reserve Board and the trade deficit with Japan. As the great applied economist Sir Alec Cairncross put it,

When it comes to action, economic theory is only one input among many. It has to be combined with a grasp of political and administrative feasibility and above all has to take advantage of experience and observation, not rely wholly on logic. As has often been remarked, logic can be a way of going wrong with confidence.


Economics, then, might be well advised to step down from the pedestal on which like the woman of the 1950s it fondly imagines it stands. A conversation in modern economics differs from economic journalism but is similar, differs from fiction but is similar, differs from poetry but is similar, differs from mathematics but is similar, differs from philosophy but is similar. There is no hierarchy here, no monist philosopher king reaching into conversations to spoil their tone. I recommend a rhetorically sophisticated culture for economists, in which, as Richard Rorty says, "neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets nor the Party were thought of as more 'rational,' or more 'scientific' or 'deeper' than one another. No particular portion of culture would be singled out as exemplifying (or signally failing to exemplify) the condition to which the rest aspired." Or as the linguist James D. McCawley puts it, "no particular tradition has a right to speak for humanity as a whole ... or for 'Reason' as divorced from all the diverse reasoning individuals and traditions of reasoning" (1990, p. 380). The present attitude, at least among those who have not yet felt the doubts of the Frustrated Scientist and the others, is ignorance about the variety of economics and of similar conversations, an ignorance breeding contempt.

Consider as a down-to-earth example the public conversation in the early 1990s about the budget crisis. The budget crisis was and is a real thing, because Gramm–Rudman–Hollings made it so. But as President Bush would have said it was also a word thing. The words make the crisis, too.

Consider the word "crisis." An illness comes to a crisis, and it passes, or else the patient dies. The very word puts a medical spin on the story. The Washington doctors could not agree on a treatment for the crisis and so the American economy was wheeled off to the morgue. Sad case. Or the word "summit." It calls up motorcades and chandeliers and peace in our time, the vain hope that the bosses will "hammer out" an agreement. Did the budget summit at Edwards Air Force Base in the fall of 1990 succeed or fail? Sad tale.

The point of such reflections is not the usual one of noting that politicians are full of hot air. Of course they are. What else is new? Cicero, Lincoln, and Newt Gingrich are full of hot air, on budget crises as on other matters. But so are we all full of hot air, we economists and journalists and plain folk beyond Washington's Beltway. Hot air is what humans breathe. The words of the budget crisis are not mere rhetoric, because there is nothing mere about wordcraft. The choice of plot, to take a piece of wordcraft, is crucial for how the budget story turned out. Representative Gingrich and Senator Kennedy, in fictional unity of purpose, imposed on the events a plot of counterrevolution against the Reagan years, for better or for worse. The story rallied the cadre from the right or left, with real political consequences.

The middle-of-the-road plot for the story also had consequences. It narrated the budget crisis as a disgraceful failure of politics, showing once again the wretched lack of responsibility in Congress and the White House. (By the way, the consequences of the middle-of-the-roader's way of telling the story are not all good. The tyrant's first rhetorical move, after all, is to discredit democratic politics as messy and irresponsible.)

In other words, rhetoric is speech with an audience. All speech that intends to persuade is rhetorical, from higher math to lower advertising. In 1991 the Republican rhetoric of the budget crisis intended to persuade an audience of "middle-income" taxpayers, the victims of the bubble in tax rates, sturdy yeomen, it turns out, who were the top 5 percent of incomes. The same wealthy audience was supposed to be persuaded by the Democratic rhetoric, because the audience of the top 5 percent is the politically influential one. The Democratic rhetoric in 1991 and in the election campaign of 1992 was to propose taxing the very (very) rich in order to save the "middle class." "Don't tax him; don't tax me; / Tax that fellow eating brie." It turns out that there aren't enough brie eaters to solve the budget crisis.

But wait a minute. The expert economists offer us a way out of the rhetoric, don't they? The public and politicians indulge in wordcraft, but don't the experts just give us the plain facts and logic?

No, they don't. Experts want to persuade audiences, too, and therefore exercise wordcraft, in no dishonorable sense. Their rhetorics agree on some points. For instance, economists agree that the "crisis" is self-imposed, a weapon wielded by the economist-turned-senator, Phil Gramm, trying to get the mule's attention. But the economic
experts disagree on whether the "underlying problem" of the deficit is serious or not. Their disagreements spring not from idiocy or bad faith but from rhetorical choices, often made unconsciously.

Suppose the economist uses a metaphor of the United States as a mere portion of a world economy, in the same way as Iowans is a portion of the upper Midwest. He will therefore not believe the story of the deficit causing a higher interest rate in the United States. The interest rate, he will say, is a result of the whole world's demand for funds. Quit worrying about the little piece of it called the US federal deficit. Or suppose the economist uses a story of a slippery slope to socialism. In that story a loosening of the federal budget leads to B-1 bombers and subsidies to farm owners in the top 5 percent of incomes.

The expertise shows in the rhetoric, though many of the experts don't recognize their own rhetoric. An economist is a poet / But doesn't know it. He is a novelist, too, and lives happily ever after. He is a philosopher, but does not know himself. Is the budget in crisis? It depends on your wordcraft, that Greek word to the wise, "rhetoric."