



MARC FUMAROLI: A REMINISCENCE AND PROLOGUE

Posted on March 1, 2024 by Philippe-Joseph Salazar



On October 2nd, 1993, Marc Fumaroli, first citizen in the Republic of Letters, [delivered a paper](#) at Princeton on the subject of rhetoric. Philippe-Joseph Salazar was his student and worked closely with him. He "sets the scene" [for this paper](#).



Marc Fumaroli was a master, yet one without disciples. In fact he scorned the idea of having "groupies," a word he used with gusto well before French intellectual *moeurs* were impregnated with Americanisms of all sorts.

I knew him well, and over a long period of time, indeed. In fact, in 1979, he set me on the path of rhetoric, after proofreading pen in hand my first book, on opera, and quipping: "And now, after *ce tour de piste*, onto the real stuff." I was barely twenty-four, it was my first book, and he spared no time and effort to guide me so that I would not mess up my *début* at the (then) sanctum of Presses universitaires de France. He was generous, but in his own way, which never was devoid of "*raillerie*." Then he supervised my Doctorat d'Etat, a hallowed and now defunct degree thanks to the Plan-Organize-Lead-Control system imposed by Brussels (and Bologna) managerial bureaucracy on academic outputs. I can hear him punning on "output." We are only a handful to have had him as a *directeur de travaux* for that recondite degree.

He was a laconic supervisor. My last supervision meeting took place over dinner in a dark restaurant in Göttingen—a side event to some colloquium he left half-way through it as it was his custom when "*les cafards*" (his word) started taking, and talking, over. He gave me sparse advice, but always cutting to the quick. Odd supervisor he was who mocked the routine rhetoric of academia, yet an adroit player in the *cursus honorum* game. One day, to my bewilderment, he took a school edition of [Les Fourberies de Scapin](#), jumped into a large office cupboard, and burst out reciting with a high pitched voice the famous tirade when the imposter defines himself:

"Heaven has bestowed on me a fair enough share of genius for the making up of all those neat strokes of mother wit, for all those ingenious gallantries to which the ignorant and vulgar give the name of impostures; and I can boast, without vanity, that there have been very few men more skilful than I in expedients and intrigues, and who have acquired a greater reputation in the noble profession." He added: "*Tout est là!*"

I remember sitting there, next to his desk, aghast at his comedic skills. He admired and knew Grotowski. Whenever I attended a colloquium where he spoke, that impersonation of his came back—not for its content, of course, but for the performance itself.

His preferred eloquent mode however was the Voltairean causerie, the off the cuff (but on target) erudite comment, to sum the supple exercise and witty display of intelligence in a conversation between peers or meant to educate novices. Formalities were not his forte. Once, upon returning from England, while dropping his leather duffel bag with a loud plonk, he exhaled: "*Ah, ces pompeux emmerdements d'Oxford.*" Translation needed?

Nonetheless Fumaroli had a following, of students and colleagues, whom he did not always treat very kindly as the man could never resist *un trait d'esprit*, at their expense of course. Victims would usually succumb in silence. All his witticisms and *actes manqués* and antics would fill up a *Fumaroliana*—a book of *ana*, that exquisite literary genre of the Republic of Letters that has disappeared from intellectual life. Nothing more unwoke than a book of *ana*. You'll get sued.

Nevertheless in September 1993 his (non) disciples together with his peers congregated in the redoubt of trendy intellectualism at Cerisy-la-Salle manor house. It is hard to imagine today what a shock it was to have a Fumaroli colloquium there. Imagine Derrida being feted at Davos. Or the Che at the RAND corporation. He told me, the moment he arrived from the tiresome rail and road journey to that *gentilhommière* in the Western Normandy countryside: "Well, *merci*, you put me a foot in the grave" (he died in 2020, though). The Cerisy colloquium had a provoking title, he chose: "*Les Lettres: un gai savoir*," an ironical, rhetorical *clin d'oeil* to the fashionableness of Cerisy's dedication to avant-garde in all its forms. But the actual theme was of course the dignity of Ciceronian *otium*, the joys scholarship affords to free minds—as in Nietzsche's *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*—while paying homage to the poetic inventiveness of medieval *gay saber*. Two years later he was elected to the Académie française while the transactions, *Le loisir lettré à l'Age Classique* (Geneva, Droz) came out at about the same time.

About ten years after Cerisy, his epigones congregated again, this time by way of a special issue of *XVIIe Siècle*, the apex journal of erudite studies on "*Age classique*" (in the French sense of classical) to reflect on "Trente ans de recherches rhétoriques" (vol LIX, No 3, July 2007). We took stock of Fumaroli's influence in shaping an entire new generation of rhetoric scholars in Europe.

Fumaroli is now nearly forgotten. I tested this on a young man who has just entered my college, Ecole

normale supérieure. This Telemachus of France's intellectual elite had only a vague idea of who Fumaroli was. If not forgotten altogether, he remains "*sulfureux*" with those who were part of the cultural and political struggles of the 80s. Significantly, after his death, a leading literary magazine of probing intelligence turned down a suggestion to highlight his contribution to French intellectual life: "Too toxic." Buried or toxic, like nuclear waste. His staggering erudition and sharp pen were feared by his opponents on the left and, I suggest, misunderstood by his political supporters on the right. In fact, Fumaroli admired intelligence, including that of his intellectual opponents like Bourdieu (I know that first hand). He helped careers of junior academics of great scholarly promise, while deriding in private their political certainties, and vanities.

Here is a key to his temperament: his favourite American writer was Gore Vidal. To this day I regret having turned down his invitation to go to Italy with him, and meet Vidal—confirming the dictum that youth is wasted on the young. He admired Vidal's ability to use his first-hand knowledge of the American patriciate, a form of erudition and, armed with it, paint compelling historical frescoes, composed with wit, elegance and a light touch. Fumaroli was the Gore Vidal of French erudition. This comparison goes further: when he wrote eloquently about the Tridentine rhetorical *aggiornamento* and the Roman Church as the power of oratory, his mind and taste were not religious or devout, they were cast in the mould of his beloved Poussin and "paganism." He was, in effect, a radical sceptic in the great tradition of French libertinage.

His *skepsis* distrust of ideas for ideas' sake ("*la peste des intellectuels!*" one of his favourite sayings) is something his intellectual opponents on the left and his fans on the right never quite fathomed about him. That is why, I believe, he felt at ease in Italy where intellectual life is far less compassé. For instance, I recall an episode in Rome when, at a bus station, someone shouted at him, "*Fumaroli, vieni qui,*" and then began an animated chat, at the kerb, on Castiglione's *Courtier*. The bus stop became a salon, nay, an academy. And, dear me, how long that conversation lasted. Buses came and went, and were missed while they talked, like in a Bertolucci movie.

In the days following Cerisy Marc asked me to go over a lecture he was to deliver at Princeton, in October. I did not alter his style, I merely tried to shorten sentences and wipe off some Gallicisms. He gave me the revised version he had typed up—the text presented here. Typos are his. He actually typed his books and papers himself, sat at his gothic desk framed by two heavy Venetian damask curtains on the second floor of a XVIIth century building where he lived, quite derelict at the time as most of the *hôtels particuliers* in the Marais—before gentrification and then globalisation by various

means. A mutual friend, and descendant of Marinetti, would help him sell it later when he moved to illustrious Left Bank quarters, rid of the sight of leathermen in chaps gathering at a gay bar round the corner.

Before that time, when he was writing, one could hear, at night, the morse-like tac-tac-tac (with longer Typex pauses) of his typewriter from the corner of rue des Mauvais Garçons (the name amused him) and rue du Bourg-Tibourg. An Italian trattoria owner across the narrow street was worried sick about his late night typing, and tried to make sure he ate properly. When *Age de l'éloquence* came out, she asked him for a signed copy. He sighed: "She thinks it is a novel, *imagine un peu!* (go figure!)." That summed up for him the difference between *les Lettres* and literature, one of his pet topics.

The text presented here is emblematic of the utterly French style of lecturing, light yet profound, a *sprezzatura* of the mind that has always been misunderstood in Anglo-American academic circles (with some notable exceptions)—to wit, and this is my last *ana*, it led him once to refuse adding footnotes to an invited article by a leading English-speaking Renaissance journal, and to exclaim in sheer exasperation: "What a nerve! If their readers don't know what my references are, then *est-ce vraiment une revue savante?*" Rich from a scholar whose hermeneutic skills were astounding and whose juggernauts of technical footnotes and primary sources (at a time when one had to go into archives and special collections; one book at a time, four a day only, and "make sure you only use a pencil") are so intimidating that they prevent his *monumenta* from being translated. This Princeton lecture is therefore without notes. *Caveat emptor*. Or *cave canem*. Take your pick.

French philosopher and essayist Philippe-Joseph Salazar writes on rhetoric as philosophy of power. Laureate of the Prix Bristol des Lumières in 2015 for his book on jihad (translated as, [*Words are Weapons. Inside ISIS's Rhetoric of Terror*](#), Yale UP). In 2022, the international community of rhetoricians honoured him with a Festschrift, [*The Incomprehensible: The Critical Rhetoric of Philippe-Joseph Salazar*](#). He holds a Distinguished Professorship in Rhetoric and Humane Letters in the Law Faculty of the University of Cape Town, South Africa.
