

# The Rhetoric of Geopolitical Fiction in Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech

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## Abstract

*An examination of the power of words, of the realm shared by fiction, poetry and political discourse, brings us to one of the most important common points linking the language of literature and its rhetoric, on the one hand, and the rhetoric of political discourse on the other: the consistent use of figurative language to appeal to the feelings of audiences. Most people would think, whether rightly or wrongly, of politics as relatively impure and manipulative and of literary language as elevated and enlightening. The emphasis in this text, a reconsideration of Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain Speech," is not on the evaluation of the quality of the literary and political discourses, but on the devices used in the public space that heavily rely on what one usually calls fictional, literary, even poetical devices to create "extra-literary" effects.*

**Key words:** *rhetoric, geopolitics, the Cold War, the special relationship, the Iron Curtain*

From the very title, this paper appears to mix up apparently unrelated fields. Only apparently. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by Wayne C. Booth is one of those "oldies but goldies" that scholars considered to have remained behind the times might still remember with nostalgia. Others might still find its relevance today in more ways than one. In his 1961 volume (referred to in the current text in its 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1983), Wayne C. Booth adopts an attitude which still carries a lot of weight today. Literary studies involve much more than the mere, relatively context-free reading and interpretation of essentially "literary" texts, having to do with a network of relations, voices and rhetorical dimensions in a very broad sense. The rhetorical dimension of literary studies has also been long acknowledged and is still to be reckoned with.

The first connection, and if it had been the only one, hardly convincing, is that between geopolitics and literary studies as far from "pure" fields of investigation. They are both "tainted" by power and

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ideological confrontations. O Tuathail stresses the “lack of innocence” of geopolitics: “Often assumed to be innocent, the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space” (O Tuathail 2005: 1). Although Booth had most likely not intended it as political, his rhetoric involves a variety of competing narrative voices, more or less reliable, struggling to convince, to persuade, to occupy and administer fictional space in order to create powerful effects on readers, themselves part and parcel of the complex process of literary communication and negotiation. In addition, Booth also questions, from the title of the first section of his volume [1], the purity of the realm he is charting with a very lucid mind, but also mindful of the power of words to create special effects as mediated by a variety of more or less deeply involved narrative voices. He is also aware that one can hardly draw a line between fictional and poetic language, both using similar devices to address their audience. And so, as it will become apparent, does (geo) political language, in which metaphorical language and repetitive devices work to create special effects on its target audience.

Discussions of the power of words, of the ground shared by fiction, poetry and political discourse, bring us to one of the most important common points linking the language of literature and its rhetoric on the one hand and the rhetoric of political discourse on the other: the consistent use of figurative language to appeal to the feelings of audiences. Some people, especially lovers of literature, might disapprove of such a connection. Most mortals would think, whether rightly or wrongly, of politics as relatively impure and manipulative and of literary language as elevated and enlightening. The emphasis in this text is not on the evaluation of the quality of the literary and political discourses, but on the devices used in the public space that heavily rely on what one usually calls fictional, literary, even poetical devices. Several other important common points will be invoked in what is to follow.

The text under study in this paper is the speech delivered by Sir Winston Churchill on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1946, while on a visit to the United States. Churchill is no longer Britain’s PM, but only a member of the Tory opposition to the then Labour government. However, Churchill is still an immensely influential figure, both at home and in America. The speech is known under two different names, both of them heavily dependent on metaphoric language. In addition to the one mentioned in the title of this paper, “The Iron Curtain Speech,” the other one, “The Sinews of Peace,”

deserves special consideration. The two will be dealt with in the complex framework provided by the “rhetoric of geopolitical fiction” as it will unfold in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Some might think that the title must be tackled first, as it sheds light on the text proper, sometimes describing it in earnest, sometimes ironically. In this rhetorical approach to the language of Sir Winston Churchill, the context is just as important as any other part of the complex pattern. In the language of fiction, the concept of setting refers to the space, time, and cultural coordinates of a narrative, thus proving the necessary frame in which the horizons of expectations of the various subjects involved in understanding, interpretation and communication tend to overlap or even coincide. Something similar happens in geopolitics, where both the “literature context”, the cartographic mapping of the world, and the specific time and space coordinates of one particular speech are to be considered.

By the so-called “literature context” that was mentioned above one may refer to the immediate environment of geopolitical material that had come to prominence before the text under study here, in its turn, emerged in the public sphere. The most significant “geopolitical literature” of the immediate context was George Kennan’s February 1946 “Long Telegram,” also known under the title of “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” It will soon be seen as supplying a basis for America’s new foreign policy. From his experience as diplomat stationed at the American Embassy since 1944, Kennan writes the text that would first spell out the metaphorical term defining his country’s geopolitical attitude and behavior toward Soviet Russia: *containment*. Considering the circumstances of what would soon be called the Cold War, Kennan advises the State Department that “the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies” (Kennan 2003: 63). Those who are familiar with geopolitical developments of the Cold War may take the term containment for granted, but initially it has to be seen with its strong metaphorical load: Communism is a dangerous contagious disease, very much like the non-metaphorical plague, which may spread and contaminate whole areas of the world. The politics of containment will thus try to contain the disease by a series of *cordons sanitaires* rather than facing Communism in direct military confrontations, the unwise way to go about it in a post-war age where the whole world wants to sigh more than a sigh of relief for at least one generation.

The “extra-literature context” was becoming obvious for the American side, especially after the realization that the important Eastern ally was busy working, expanding its sphere of influence by far from orthodox means. The realization that what was doing a former ally in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world looked like a contagious disease was gradually coming home to roost, so to speak. This is the geopolitical context in which Churchill’s historic speech is to be placed.

The more concrete, physical geographical context in which the “Iron Curtain Speech” is to be considered and interpreted is March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1946, Fulton, Missouri. Significantly enough, the American university at Fulton, Missouri, where the former British prime minister is to be awarded an honorary degree, is called Westminster College. In his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth critically engages with a number of statements made about literary communication. One of them features prominently in the fourth section of Part One, “True Art Ignores the Audience” (Booth 1983: 89-118). Booth is aware that literary art and its rhetoric do not ignore the audience, on the contrary, it imagines it and addresses it. So does an orator like Churchill in his famous speech. He successfully establishes contact and closeness with his audience: both himself, a British individual, and the American academics and students listening to him have a connection with “Westminster.” One “Westminster” is linked to the Houses of Parliament, where Churchill worked as a prominent MP and then as prime minister. The other “Westminster” is Churchill’s audience’s site of learning. They have a lot in common: not only the same language, but also a place bearing the same name. The closeness is enhanced by a sense of humor which is bound to reduce distance even further:

The name “Westminster” somehow or other seems familiar to me. I feel as if I’d heard of it before. Indeed, now that I come to think of it, it was at Westminster that I received a very large part of my education in politics, dialectic, rhetoric, and one or two other things. So in fact we have both been educated at the same, or similar, or, at any rate, kindred establishments (Churchill 2018: 1).

*Captatio benevolentiae* by a seasoned orator like Churchill also involves almost exaggerated modesty. The speaker defines himself as a private visitor. In one particular sense he is to be seen as such. At that particular moment, Churchill, at the venerable age of 80, is at the end of a remarkable political career. His rise to fame was linked to him realizing, among a minority of British politicians, the Nazi threat in the 1930s. His

"finest hour" had been his heroic stance against Hitler's *Festung Europa* during World War II. After the war, his party had lost the elections. His "private visitor" status goes with his less prominent public position: he is the head of the Tory opposition in the British Parliament. His more than private visitor status is, however, far more prominent: he stands for history as History, representing the last heroic episode in the story of the British Empire. In Fulton, he acknowledges being introduced to a distinguished academic audience by the President of the United States himself. What is more, he stresses the fact that the US president has allowed him to express himself freely "in anxious and baffling times." Once again, the baffling times have already been dealt with in Kennan's previously mentioned "Long Telegram." Churchill uses it as a steppingstone for his own historic and historical account of those special times, in which he represents his own state entity, still an empire, as a partner worth listening to in the above-mentioned "anxious and baffling times." The new hegemon has a very special ally, one featured in the special relationship.

It is interesting to note that major geopolitical theorists, such as Immanuel Wallerstein and George Modelski, as Colin Flint notes (2006: 39), see World War I and World War II as one episode in a confrontation that decides the next hegemon (Wallerstein) or the next world leader (Modelski). However, this dramatic change is not represented in the special relationship narrative as a competition between the old leader (the British Empire) and the new leader/superpower (the US). On the contrary, unlike in Modelski's model, the challengers are, in quick succession, the enemy in World War II, and then the previous ally, Stalin's Russia, in George Kennan's and Churchill's geopolitical representations and statements. Since representations, not only realities, play an important part in geopolitics, Churchill's text as major representation shares a lot with other representations, such as major fictional texts, following a similar rhetoric (hence, once again, the title of this article). Like in Wayne C. Booth rhetoric of fiction, the narrative voice in the geopolitical text (one can see Churchill here as both author and narrator) has to convey "the intensity of realistic illusion" (see Booth 1983: 40-49), giving the impression of "objectivity" (Booth 1983: 67-80), while at the same time resorting to figurative language to combine intensity and vividness, in order to persuade the audience, thus "manipulating mood" (Booth 1983: 200-204), while giving the impression that reason is appealed to.

Coming back to the figurative load of the two titles of Churchill's piece of geopolitical oratory, "The Iron Curtain Speech" and "The Sinews

of Peace Speech," one can easily see two apparently distinct ways of representing the geopolitical model and its components. The first metaphorical representation features an arresting geopolitical combination of images. The first image associated with the iron curtain will appear later in the speech. It is the shadow which has just fallen over the world (basically, in a naturally Eurocentric view on the part of the speaker) over a large section of Europe. The shadow prevents the West from seeing what is going on in that shady area controlled by Soviet Russia:

A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory. Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organisation intends to do in the immediate future, or what are the limits, if any, to their expansive and proselytising tendencies (Churchill 2018: 13).

There follows a second image, evoking the rise of the dramatic division between the free West and the totalitarian, Communist East: not a light, usually semi-transparent curtain, easy to draw aside in order to look out of the window, but a heavy, oppressive, impenetrable "iron curtain." Behind it lies the newly established Soviet sphere of influence in a new geopolitical configuration in which the former ally is the challenger, the antagonist, possibly the enemy in foreseeable confrontations, hot or cold. The representation is, again, highly dramatic and ominous, after the previous figurative foreshadowing (another important term usually referring to literary narratives) of terrible villains in the metaphorical, allegorical shape of "two marauders, war and tyranny" (2018: 8), threatening the "temple of peace" (2018: 9). And then, after the fall of the shadow, after the impending threats posed by the allegorical figures of war and tyranny as War and Tyranny to the Temple of Peace, Churchill adds the most often invoked sequence of his iron curtain speech:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow (Churchill 2018: 13-14).

The second title of the speech, an equally metaphorical representation, featuring "the sinews of peace," is a much nicer way to

rephrase American President Theodore Roosevelt's famous words, "speak softly and carry a big stick." Allegorical representations of peace may consist of white doves or vestals dressed in white, long flowing dresses. Even in Churchill's speech, something similar, the image of the above-mentioned Temple of Peace occurs more than once. However, the "sinews" here announce that the global context urges the new geopolitical leader, the US, and its ally, seen as a friend in a special relationship, to be able to flex their military muscles in the new age of containment, which will soon be called the Cold War.

What is more, even "our Russian friends and Allies during the war" seem to admire the show of power, rather than expressions of weakness, thus inviting their former allies, the Americans and the Brits, to prove that they are strong. In other words, Churchill seems to be saying that "The Russians are asking for it": "From what I have seen of our Russian friends and Allies during the war, I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness." (16) Again, Churchill appears to use an attitude examined by Wayne C. Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* in order to heighten the significance of events in a narrative. He notes that "Commentary about the moral and intellectual qualities of characters always affects our view of the events in which those characters act." (Booth 1983: 196)

Apparently praising "our Russian friends," who appear to admire strength, and despise weakness, Churchill stresses the importance of a show of strength for both allies and potential opponents. He thus heightens the realization of the significance of his proposal. As a result of that realization, Churchill thinks that "the old doctrine of a balance of power is unsound. We cannot afford, if we can help it, to work on narrow margins, offering temptations to a trial of strength" (2018: 16). In other words, if America had played its pre-World War I geopolitical game in terms of the traditional balance of power that European countries had played previously, in the new post-World War II configuration Britain's partner in the special relationship was urged to play its overwhelming hegemonic role. America was invited to do it in strict alliance with the Western world under the overall authority of the new United Nations Organization.

Soviet Russia, like Nazi Germany previously, should not be tempted to challenge the new unipolar world order. In order to achieve this, Churchill urges the new hegemon to assume its world order

responsibilities in the company of the democratic, peace-loving forces standing firmly west of the newly erected Iron Curtain. They have to flex their military muscles and show their strength, so that everyone can see, especially the rival great power, “the sinews of peace,” thus avoiding a hot war military confrontation. In this new geopolitical axis (Churchill does not use that word, as it has negative connotations after the war), Churchill claims that the pivotal positions should be assumed by the English-speaking peoples. By that he implies that America should rely on Britain and the British Commonwealth more than on any other freedom-loving, democratic country not sharing the common Anglo-Saxon culture. The special relationship includes two great powers, America and the still standing British Empire as the new hegemon’s most reliable partner, the two being seen by Churchill as the sole guarantors of the world’s postwar security:

Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States of America (Churchill 2018: 11).

In support of a geopolitical move based on an English-speaking fraternal association, Churchill significantly mentions that the US has already made a Permanent Defense Agreement with Britain’s Dominion of Canada. Canada is us, the British Empire, Churchill seems to imply. It is a country which is, he chooses to explicitly claim, “devotedly attached to the British Commonwealth and Empire” (Churchill 2018: 12). In the early stages of the still problematic, post-American War of Independence (from 1783 onwards), Canada, still under the sovereign rule of the British monarch, had been a security threat for the new American state. In traditional geopolitical vision, an emerging power must avoid the neighbourhood of competing powers. Canada is thus a link, rather than a threat, and the still vast British Commonwealth and Empire (it is 1946) constitutes a special partner a special geopolitical relationship, the message clearly states.

As if to remind the Americans that seapower had been a defining feature in history, and that Britain still controls the world’s oceans and counts as a world power, Churchill mentions both its centuries-old, still unbroken pact with the oldest European seapower, Portugal [2] (dating back to 1384) and, very significantly, the Treaty of Collaboration and



Mutual Assistance with Soviet Russia, almost fifteen years old. To please his "Russian friends" but also to show the Americans Britain's international role, Churchill reassuringly adds that the British – Soviet treaty of alliance "might well be a fifty years' Treaty so far as we are concerned" (Churchill 2018: 7).

"Heightening the significance of events," the previously-mentioned strategy Booth discusses in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, stressing the moral and intellectual traits of characters to create stronger, special effects is consistently used by Churchill. The main aim is not to praise the various "friends," but to show the Americans how important Britain is in the "special relationship" which he is defining in this speech, both "literary" and geopolitical. This strategy is used by Churchill, while praising France, to settle his accounts with General de Gaulle and to draw attention to France as a weak link in the emerging Western alliance, in contrast to Britain, a reliable partner. First he praises de Gaulle, the most important rival within the Western alliance, then he goes on to say:

All my public life I have worked for a strong France and I never lost faith in her destiny, even in the darkest hours. I will not lose faith now. However, in a great number of countries, far from the Russian frontiers and throughout the world, Communist fifth columns are established and work in complete unity and absolute obedience to the directions they receive from the Communist center (Churchill 2018: 10).

What is the connection between the first sentence in the quote above and the following "However, in a great number of countries, far from the Russian frontiers..."? Obviously, France is one of them, which, like Italy or Greece, appears to be vulnerable to Soviet influence, and in which the Communists will be very influential for several decades. Which only goes on to stress the importance of the special relationship as the new geopolitical axis, around which more vulnerable countries should rally. As a matter of fact, de Gaulle's special position in the following years would affect the problematic geopolitical configurations in which French-British and French-American relations would be very important.

The main aim of Churchill's speech appears to highlight the strategic special relationship between a previous hegemon and the emerging one, linked by the English language and by strong cultural bonds. However, this special relationship, he does not miss to stress at the end of his speech, is meant to serve to pave, as the best expression of International Relations liberalism/idealism, "the high roads of the future"

for what he believes to be the general welfare and security of the world within the broader framework of the United Nations. If this succeeds,

... there will be an overwhelming assurance of security. If we adhere faithfully to the Charter of the United Nations and walk forward in sedate and sober strength seeking no one's land or treasure, seeking to lay no arbitrary control upon the thoughts of men; if all British moral and material forces and convictions are joined with your own in fraternal association, the high-roads of the future will be clear, not only for us but for all, not only for our time, but for a century to come (Churchill 2018: 17).

Churchill's rhetoric as convincingly expressed in this classic geopolitical speech is a remarkable illustration of the combined effect of the discourse of International Relations liberalism (his remarkable oratorical skills evoke values and ideals, the strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter) and of International Relations realism as a lucid, rational understanding of the geopolitical needs and self-interests of emerging empires and of the means of checking challengers and adversaries by a show of force. An understanding of how the text as rhetoric works obviously involves the whole array of voices, geopolitical actors, more or less friendly, regional and global contexts. It is what Wayne C. Booth, with no apparent interest in geopolitics, advocates for the understanding of the literary text in its complexity at a time "when too much criticism, pursuing 'autonomy,' floats off into the Great Inane, with never a reference to anything but its own concept-spinning" (xii). The importance of context, as well of rhetoric in all its senses, both in Aristotle's and in Booth's sense, is what Churchill appears to be aware of in his highly "literary" geopolitical speech. It is hardly surprising that 6 years later he would be awarded the Nobel Prize for... literature.

## Notes

[1] Artistic Purity and the Rhetoric of Fiction.

[2] Referring to the four world seapowers since 1494 (Portugal, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the US), Modelski considers the first of them the most controversial one (Modelski 1988: 186). However, in Churchill's geopolitical narrative, Portugal is the one which initiates the centuries-old geopolitical pattern based on seapower supremacy.

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