



# The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values

James Engell

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During the past century, literary education, often divorced from rhetoric, has grown increasingly distant from the practice of language in statecraft, law, religion, and ethics. Yet literature and rhetoric retain open, independent powers to enhance what Emerson calls "the conduct of life." In these provocative essays, James Engell argues that a more complete literary training can foster a heightened sense of shared social experience, an awareness of diverse views, a love of language, and a more powerful ability to express the values we enshrine or debate. Revealing a set of deep intersections among literature, politics, rhetoric, and the public deliberation of values, he explores how dedicated individuals of different callings resort to heightened language in order to secure knowledge, test beliefs, consider policy, and promote action.

Through profiles of Lincoln, Burke, Swift, Hume, Lowth, Vico, and others, Engell explores the political and ethical involvement of writers with their culture in order to reestablish links between literary qualities of language and the means by which we challenge power and secure liberty. He presents a cogent argument for a different, expanded kind of literary education, suggesting that training in rhetoric, now often misunderstood or neglected, can serve the common good without becoming mired in partisan squabbles or academic pedantry.

Despite the dominance of visual media in our society, observes Engell, the difficult problems we face must be resolved through language. By presenting writers who use resourceful language to engage political contests and cultural issues, he contributes to ongoing debates in education, politics, and culture without subscribing to easy labels of "left" and "right" or "traditional" versus "innovative." He demonstrates imaginative ways to apply time-tested literary techniques to a changing world, making use of the past yet in a way that the past could not predict. This passionately argued book calls for a shift in the ways we teach and regard literature.



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