

In “Practicing the Art of Rhetoric: Tradition and Invention,” Thomas B. Farrell writes that the Aristotelian sense of *praxis*, or “practice” offers an “incremental road to recovery” from current social ills, or what Farrell terms our “‘dark’ time of self-indulgence and incoherent moral discourse” (Farrell 183). In particular, he writes, “classical rhetoric offers us a practical ideal of the appropriate; *phronesis*, or practical wisdom” (Farrell 187). This practical wisdom is a shared creative force that establishes a “rhetorical forum” (Farrell 197) or “space of civic engagement” wherein citizens of the body politic may create community through shared rhetorical occasions (Farrell 187). The classical tradition favors a maieutic approach to engendering *phronesis*, and this acts as a restorative to the excesses fostered by the foundational metaphors of both Marx and Hegel, whose strategies of critique offer a “*praxis*” wherein everyone is rendered either a “Lord” or a “bondsmen,” a master or a slave (Hegel 115). Rather than create communities where civic speech acts must necessarily devolve into acts of identification, traditional rhetoric contains a methodology of interaction that fosters a more radical trust in the audience to do its own thinking; in other words, the audience is permitted to observe the subject matter being discussed, rather than be sidetracked into a struggle session where all participants are neatly sorted into a particular pigeon hole. “Persuasion” in the classical tradition is not presented as oratory meant to categorize and identify, but rather as a human project which fosters impartiality in the interest of discovering truth by careful and sincere consideration of a subject. The classical tradition calls us to the mental play of midsummer where we go beyond what we have been told we are to work out what is before us in reality. The “rhetorical occasion” thereby becomes a private moment of thought in each audience member’s mind, a place where each member is trusted to either succeed or fail at the act of finding the Aristotelian mean, a place between two excesses, a place of thought that is denied by critique.

The creative power of traditional rhetoric, then, resides in its ability to create thinkers who either transform or transmogrify by means of the thoughts directing the choices *they* select to make about something *other than themselves* rather than a fearful acquiescence to the modern orator’s suggested role-playing. Within the tradition of classical rhetoric, the cultivation of speech is a practice that allows groups to expand their vision beyond themselves to gain insights into reality that would otherwise be barred by their necessarily limited individual ability to apprehend reality. By considering the words of Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian, specific ways in which the classical tradition supports the flourishing of impartial civil discourse emerge. Through its promotion of certain personal habits of disinterested thought—namely, dialectic, enthymemes, and contemplation—the classical tradition produces orators who trust in the human person’s potential to conceive and bear a vision of reality that goes beyond that of the rhetor, beyond what may be presently imagined by either the orator or his audience members. From Farrell’s “space of civic engagement” radically new understandings of reality, meaningful encounters with truths heretofore unknown may emerge from a group of orators sincerely committed to the impartiality fostered by traditional rhetorical methodology.

Farrell notes that “rhetoric is an art of practice to be developed in real-life settings, where matters are in dispute and there are no fixed or final criteria for judgment” (Farrell 187). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato places the dialogue in a meaningful setting as he argues that philosophical speech directed at discerning truth is better than drowsily giving in to physical desires. In the middle of the dialogue, a myth is told that seems to illustrate the conception of rhetoric as an art which commingles beauty and reason. The “real life” figurative setting, situated within the narrative, is an idyllic, though hot, afternoon set in the countryside outside of Athens. The other “real life” setting is in the mind of

the reader of Plato's text, wherever and whenever he reads it. Socrates and Phaedrus are sitting under a "plane," or sycamore tree, when Socrates remarks:

'By Hera, it really is a beautiful resting place. The plane tree is tall and very broad; the chaste-tree, high as it is, is wonderfully shady and since it is in full bloom, the whole place is filled with its fragrance. From under the plane tree the loveliest spring runs with very cool water—our feet can testify to that. The place appears to be dedicated to Achelous and some of the Nymphs, if we can judge from the statues and votive offerings. Feel the freshness of the air; how pretty and pleasant it is; how it echoes with the summery, sweet song of the cicadas' chorus! The most exquisite thing of all, of course, is the grassy slope: it rises so gently that you can rest your head perfectly when you lie down on it, my dear Phaedrus.' (Bizzell, 163; 230b-d)

The reader is presented with a scene of glorious leisure and natural beauty. The "plane" tree in Greek is *platanos*, suggesting that the shade afforded by the tree may be construed as the presence of the author, Plato (Bizzell 279). Plato seems to be suggesting that the text itself is a place for rest, reverence, and the contemplation of beauty thereby underscoring the way in which practicing rhetoric impartially frees us from being enslaved by the audience's whims as an orator committed uncompromisingly to truth will accept the consequences of his speech acts, come what may. The pastime of study is presented as beatific not only due to the setting's seductive allure; additionally Socrates notes, that even though "landscapes and trees have nothing" to teach him, in fact, for the philosopher, shaking "the leaves of a book in front of" him is the way to capture and keep his attention because he is "devoted to learning" (Bizzell 163; 230e). We, the readers, then, are being called to step under the canopy of the sycamore tree, the air saturated by the scent of lilac shrub (the "chaste-tree"), and drumming with the buzz of the cicadas in the sense that practicing rhetoric frees our minds to seek the highest human goods, that which is beautiful and true.

That a discussion of rhetoric is set in such environs implies that beauty and the sense of wonder it elicits requires a better response than napping; we are called to use speech for deliberative thought followed by right action. The study of rhetoric aids in our growth as competent deliberators. Socrates asserts it is our "acquired judgment that pursues what is best" even if our "inborn desire for pleasures" is also being sparked (Bizzell 169; 237d-e). The votive candles to the river god Achelous may serve as a warning to keep our wits about us because he is the father of the Sirens, bird-like women whose beautiful singing lures sailors to their deaths. We must check our desire for pleasure by means of rational deliberation, even when we are inspired by the beauty that calls such desires to the fore. The *Phaedrus* explores the ways in which the intersection between these modes of human life—desire and deliberation—are intertwined with the study of rhetoric which combines beauty, longing, and reason in a single speech act.

As Socrates and Phaedrus are lingering under the plane tree and dangling their feet in the stream, Socrates recounts how the cicadas came to be. The myth of the cicadas presents a narrative summation of Plato's view that philosophical inquiry, or dialectic, is served by rhetoric. The story appears midway through his conversation with

Phaedrus, as Socrates turns from the topic of love to a discussion of the value of rhetoric and its relationship to writing. Socrates recounts the origin tale of the cicada in an enthymematic move which calls the reader to connect desire, beauty, and deliberation. Rather than give in to their “inborn desire for pleasures,” Socrates playfully exhorts both himself and Phaedrus to eschew the usual behavior of those finding themselves in such an idyllic place in the heat of the day, lest they be mistaken for slaves by the cicadas. Throughout the *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents a picture of the speaker and audience as equals working together to reach a better understanding of what is false and what is true.

After rousing themselves to engage in a dialectical conversation, Socrates realizes that Phaedrus does not know about the muses role in the story of the cicadas, so he explains: cicadas were once human, but upon learning to sing from the newly born muses, they were flooded with a sublime joy: “so overwhelmed [were they] with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it” (Bizzell 183 259c). The artist, broadly construed as anyone who devotes his life to doing something well, is flooded with joy because he loves the practice for itself and not for some other good it can garner him. Recognizing the purity of their intent, the humans’ love for singing itself, the muses transform them at the moment of their death into cicadas who are set up to be deliberative observers of humanity charged with alerting the muses to those who have honored them; while artists skilled in dance are mentioned by the cicadas to Terpsichore, and those who write moving love poetry are remembered to Erato, those skilled in a “special kind of music,” harmonies created “by leading a philosophical life” are mentioned to Calliope and Urania, the muses who “sing in the sweetest voice” and are the presiders over “the heavens and all discourse, human and divine” (Bizzell 183). The judgment of our speech by the cicadas underscores a point Farrell makes, namely that “the agency of human engagement and choice is occasioned” (Farrell 193); in other words, our deliberations and their attendant acts must be guided by an unceasing passion for truth, as Socrates suggests. We must practice the art of discourse because of the joy it brings in and of itself.

The myth also suggests that beauty forges fellowship that transcends other considerations. Farrell asserts that choosing to practice rhetoric in the classical sense must be done with an understanding that the Marxist view of praxis as “the concrete embodiment of existent social forces, understood as a mode of production” is necessary (Farrell 183). However, the appeal of classical rhetoric is precisely that it does not limit the human person in this manner. Being offered the hope that by carefully considering what is good and then acting upon that notion while seeking to converse, dispute, and practice dialectic with whomever is put in your path is not only the Socratic ideal, but also a restorative antidote to the hollow notion that an individual human person is a mere instantiation of an aggregate “social force.” Classical rhetoric offers the chance for one to be a manifestation of beauty. Farrell’s rhetorical forums (Farrell 198) may emerge, therefore, wherever individuals cultivate friendship focused on philosophical inquiry and rhetorical study. The necessary propriety such friendships require is to be found in the careful, sincere interaction of the philosopher and the rhetorician, for, as Farrell concludes, “propriety is always possessed of both an ethical and an aesthetic dimension” (Farrell 198). Assiduous philosophical study should lead to an understanding of virtue while the rhetorical practices of antiquity are meant to lead to beauty both in the sense of well crafted arguments and eloquence.

While the *Phaedrus* discusses the importance of combining rhetoric and philosophy, beauty and truth, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* shows that rhetoric and dialectic are fundamentally connected at the level of the sentence. Sincerely engaging in worldbuilding, sentence by sentence, with a willing and sincere interlocutor is the power afforded by

classical rhetoric; Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, methodically demonstrates how we can use language to apprehend reality more clearly as we "employ persuasion, just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, not in order that we may in practice employ it in both ways, ... but in order that we may see clearly what the facts are" (Bizzell 214; 1355a). This ability to "see" by crafting opposing arguments is a skill offered by the practice of both rhetoric and dialectic. Farrell lauds this process of coming into knowledge through careful use of argumentation; he writes, "rhetoric is more than just practice; it is the entire process of forming, expressing, and judging public thought in real life" (Farrell 208). In fact, it is the practice of truly apprehending "real life" by submitting arguments to reasoning in a disinterested and deliberative manner. In other words, it is not "thought in real life," but "real life" accessed by means of "thought."

These moments of creation and connection occur, according to Farrell, in a "rhetorical forum" which is "any encounter setting sufficiently durable to serve as a recurring 'gathering place' for discourse. As such, the forum provides a space" for multiple expressed positions to encounter one another" (Farrell 197). In a classical forum, guided by Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the space would necessarily provide an arena for opposing views. Anyone discussing matters in such a forum would need to take the focus away from identifying himself and direct his attention to which argument is most likely true. In fact, Aristotle contends, truth emerges when opposing sides of a question are examined impartially: "no other arts draw opposite conclusions: Dialectic and rhetoric alone do this" (Bizzell 212; 1155a). Realizing the deliberative process has built into it the need for opposing views is one way in which classical rhetoric offers a radical freedom from political partisanship. Farrell writes that "by extending our appreciation for the practical activity of rhetoric beyond the singularity of speech acts and univocal claims, it becomes possible to locate a redemptive impetus within the larger unfolding frame of its process" (Farrell 208). The clearest example of this "redemptive impetus" is the way in which entertaining opposing views is deemed necessary to arrive at truth, not debilitating or harmful. Furthermore, the tradition offers views of "truth" that do not admit certainty, so such an endeavor at seeking truth could be framed as a search for that which is irrefutably false or possibly true, following the views of Cicero in *De Inventione* (Bizzell 275).

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle asserts that "neither rhetoric nor dialectic is the scientific study of any one separate subject: Both are faculties for providing arguments" (Bizzell 213; 1356a). However, we use dialectic to reach a conclusion, while rhetoric teaches us to persuade (Bizzell 213; 1356a). Knowing the art and methodology of rhetoric is analogous to knowing the art and practice of medicine, Aristotle writes (Bizzell 214; 1357b). We apprehend what is true, and we inform others of the results of our inquiries through persuasive speech, not to mislead or manipulate, but with the goal of persuading. Moreover, Aristotle notes that ideas must be dispensed with if confuted, and the rhetorician is more quickly able to see which of two arguments is most likely to be true, so the more people trained to be both impartial rhetoricians and disinterested philosophers focused on finding truth (or that which is irrefutably false or possible, if notions of absolute truth are unacceptable), the more likely a society is to be just. Like a doctor who, by means of his knowledge, shepherds the health of one who is ill, the rhetorician performs a speech act that provides scaffolding for both himself and his audience so that *both* may discern the veracity of an argument. For political or forensic matters the rhetorician seeks to present clear arguments that aid in making a decision and for occasions of shared grief or joy he crafts sufficiently beautiful ceremonial speeches (Bizzell 216; 1358b). The importance of the classically trained rhetorician in society, then, flows from his absolute and selfless commitment to discerning what is most likely, or, in other words, truth.

The relationship at the heart of rhetoric is described by Aristotle as two persons both contemplating a single subject. Thereby the focus is moved from critique's obsession with identifying "lords and bondsmen" to fraternal meditation on reality. Aristotle describes this relationship as he notes that there are three elements in making any speech: "speaker, subject, and person addressed" (Bizzell 216; 1358b). Rather than a binary opposition, there is a triad and the people involved share in the work of discernment. A truly Peripatetic rhetorical forum, therefore, requires impartial rhetors, dispassionate deliberation, and a spirit of playful willingness to engage the truth wherever it is found. Arguments in such a forum cease to be passionate talismans conferring virtue on their holders based on the political partisanship they espouse; rather in the classical rhetorical forum, virtue develops by the willingness to be persuaded by the force of the better argument. No argument is too precious to be jettisoned. Seeking truth in this manner, being classically trained to use logic and rhetoric to understand and communicate, is proposed as a personal habit that cultivates impartial inquiry. In such a forum, the examination of opposing arguments and the gleeful play that enthusiastically expresses wonder at the mysteries and conundrums of reality abound. No one view is considered sacrosanct, so inquiry and play is encouraged. In such a brightly lit space, the focus shifts from the modern preoccupation with the dangers of dissent to the classical embrace of the search for the probable.

In a rhetorical forum following the ideas of Aristotle, enthymemes are the building blocks of shared argumentation (Bizzell 213; 1356a). Aristotle's *Rhetoric* clearly delineates the ways in which an orator's enthymeme *evokes* agency (to use Farrell's phrase) in the listeners by asking them to mentally work alongside the rhetor to determine the truth of a contentious, yet-to-be settled statement (Farrell 189). "A statement," Aristotle writes, "is persuasive and credible either because it is directly self-evident or because it appears to be proved from other statements that are so" (Bizzell 214; 1356b). Enthymemes, like syllogisms, use statements; a demonstrative enthymeme is formed by combining two "compatible statements" while the refutative is formed by combining two opposing statements. Enthymemes, unlike syllogisms, do not state all their premises. Instead, the listeners or readers supply the missing premises and conclusions. For example, the "refutative enthymeme" Aristotle writes, "has a greater reputation than the demonstrative, because within a small space it works out two opposing arguments, and arguments put side by side" are clearer to the audience" (Bizzell 235). Allowing the audience the chance to engage in the discovery process is a vital component of the classical rhetorical forum, for the act of reasoning and the desires we experience should be working in tandem, with both the speaker and the audience gazing at the subject being discussed rather than at themselves. The audience, working alongside the orator, is encouraged to give free reign to their creative impulses to construct arguments in order to better see reality. The classical tradition thereby liberates listeners and readers to make choices based on reason rather than fears of reprisal, wrongthink, or retribution.

In addition to using dialectic and enthymemes to either persuade or arrive at truth, a third practice necessary in the study of rhetoric is contemplation. Farrell does not address this element of rhetoric, and he suggests that limiting the rhetorical forum to "the reader and implied author" is fraught with problems because it is difficult to choose the texts to be read" (Farrell 196). However, concerns about which texts to read or hear are a separate matter from the interaction between audience and author; humans will continue to communicate with or without perfectly designed safety protocols, so such concerns may be jettisoned from a discussion about rhetorical forums. Such a rhetorical move, shifts the speaker and reader from the *subject at hand*, and that is one major flaw in the way in which *praxis* is presented in the Marxist and Hegelian traditions. Farrell's article is a prime example of this flaw; he is continually

being drawn away from his reputed subject, namely the ways in which the classical rhetorical tradition is an antidote to the degradation of modern public discourse, by the need to signal his political affiliations through examples or reference the concept of otherness as a stumbling block to adopting methodologies from classical rhetoric. However, since these are not the focus of his essay, he does not follow their introduction with any resolution. Otherness is built into the fabric of classical rhetoric, for the subject is always that which is other. The speakers communicate about the subject, not each other, so in a sense, the otherness of the speaker and audience member is dissolved in the speech act. We cannot linger forever under the sycamore listening to the cicadas, though, so once we have exited the classical rhetorical forum, we return to our divisive world of factions and anger and condemnation; however, the scent of lilacs clings to our clothing, and the somnolent afternoon spent fraternally gazing at the same subject will no doubt ameliorate future tensions to some degree.

For me, as a high school teacher at a classical school, I have been emboldened by this class to commit myself to creating such forums. I teach children at a public charter school. My students come from a variety of backgrounds: some are very poor, some wealthy, many do not speak English at home, but all of these students are transported by our discussions. A classical education, especially through reading, writing about, and discussing texts, seeks to help students identify the goal, namely wisdom, and foster prudence so that the actions students choose aim at the good. The human person flourishes when he chooses to act based on the dictates of reason. For example, the 6th graders in my literature class are currently reading *The Wind in the Willows*. In the text, they encounter true friendship and a sincere use of rhetoric as Badger tries to reason with Toad in an attempt to stop Toad's reckless motor car obsession. Toad's misuse of rhetoric as he hoodwinks Ratty into letting him go--through nothing more than the power of his speech--offers the students an example of the misuse of language. Who used language most effectively? Badger failed to persuade Toad, but Toad was dishonest. Why be honest if being dishonest will help you achieve your aim, the teacher might ask. Once that question is put forth, a passionate discussion ensues as each student wrestles with the choices Badger and Toad have made. Badger, I believe, is the true rhetorician, in the Aristotelian sense. Toad, on the other hand, is not, though the danger of becoming like Toad is always a possibility.

To conclude, I suggest, in disagreement with Farrell, that not only should the notion that a single reader, text, and author be understood as a proper rhetorical forum, but also the solitary individual engaged in contemplation should also be understood as an Aristotelian triad of speaker, subject, and audience. To sum up this idea, Quintilian's remarks on the subject in *Institutes of Oratory* are helpful. He writes:

Next to writing is *meditation*, which indeed derives strength from it, and is something between the labor of writing and the trial of our fortune in extemporary speaking; and I know not whether it is not more frequently of use than either; for we cannot write everywhere and at all times; but there is abundance of time and room for thought. (Bizzell 359).

Writing trains our mind, and meditating upon a subject strengthens these habits of impartiality, disinterested consideration, and passion for truth. Quintillian notes:

We must write, as carefully and as much, as we can; for as the ground, by being dug to a great depth, becomes more fitted for fructifying and nourishing seeds, so improvement of the mind, acquired from more than mere superficial cultivation, pours forth the fruits of study in richer abundance, and trains them with greater fidelity. For without this precaution, the very faculty of speaking extempore will but furnish us with empty loquacity, and words born on the lips. In writing are the roots, in writing are the foundations of eloquence; by writing resources are stored up, as it were, in a sacred repository, whence they may be drawn forth for sudden emergencies, or as circumstances require. Let us above all things get strength, which may suffice for the labor of our contests, and may not be exhausted by use (Bizzell 352).

By writing, contemplating, and studying with care rhetoricians may guard against speaking in error through hasty deliberations. Therefore, the triad of speaker, subject, and audience must be extended to the individual alone with his thoughts because it is only in quiet study that we can effectively eradicate the types of mistakes that Farrell warns against. A cycle of reading, writing, deliberating, discussing by means of dialectic must precede any rhetorical act. Thereby *phronesis*, or what Farrell terms “practical wisdom,” but which might also be understood as the virtue of prudence, is engendered.

Though Farrell’s paper suggests that the classical rhetorical tradition may be a means of correcting ills prevalent in modern discourse, he refuses to extend the rhetorical franchise to reader, text, and author or to the individual engaged in meditation who comprises the speaker (thinker), subject (thoughts), and audience (contemplator) in one individual. A true rhetorical forum must admit both. By avoiding the pitfalls critique which at its worst seeks to use categorizing and identifying as a form of silencing opposition, the methodology of the classical rhetorical tradition encourages habits of mind that court impartiality in the interest of discovering truth by careful and sincere consideration of a subject. The traditional art of rhetoric calls us to fuse beauty and logic as we cultivate speech to be a tool for finding truth. The “rhetorical occasion” thereby becomes a private moment of thought in the minds of the audience members as well as the orator or author.

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