

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Inquiries ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***

Department of Political Science

Baylor University

1 Bear Place, 97276

Waco, TX 76798

email interpretation@baylor.edu

Beauty in Love and Speaking of Love: Lessons from the *Phaedrus*

ROBERT FAULKNER

BOSTON COLLEGE (EMERITUS)

robert.faulkner@bc.edu

ON BEAUTY: WHY *PHAEDRUS* AND NOT *HIPPIAS*?

We speak of “beauty” most or most forcefully with respect to the human body, and that, of course, is related to the force of erotic attraction. Plato’s *Phaedrus*¹ is most famous for Socrates’s two speeches deprecating and defending erotic desire. Still, these analyses, and another from the orator Lysias, all take place in speeches, albeit speeches of seduction. While each speech manifests desire for beauty, moreover, and speech as instrument of desire, each also exhibits a different understanding, and a different priority, of this desire. Questions are provoked. Which form of desire for beauty is better, if any? Is there a best or true form? The answer, if there is one, seems to call for a weighing by intelligence of the diverse opinions. Or should desire—as if, say, for food—decide?² But, even then, which desire for food—hunger, say, or gluttony?—is it reasonable to satisfy, and how much? Our reason seems not only an instrument of desire, but also a revelation of the types and priorities of desire and things desired. Such include desires for beautiful speech such as poetry and ingenious rhetoric. Socrates’s interlocutor Phaedrus seems that kind of lover, a lover of beauty, but especially of the beauty of speeches.

¹ *Plato’s Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). I vary only rarely from Nichols’s translation; all simple textual references (e.g., 435b) are to this edition. For the Greek: *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (London: Heinemann, 1966).

² As Martha Craven Nussbaum argues in “‘This Story Isn’t True’: Poetry, Goodness, and Understanding in Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom and the Arts*, ed. Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 79–124.

Ferrari calls him an “impresario of speeches,” which seems about right.³ The longest and concluding portion of this examination of *Phaedrus*, the only extended part in dialogue form, appraises various forms of rhetoric and poetry, especially rhetoric.

A properly full discussion of the *Phaedrus* on beauty would treat the teachings of related dialogues. This essay is not so full. It provides only the occasional illustrative comparison. Here is the most relevant example. The *Phaedrus* surely supplements in various ways the thematic discussions of beauty in the *Greater* and *Lesser Hippias*.⁴ How? Those two short dialogues, especially the *Greater*, consider *to kalon* directly. But neither thematically discusses beauty erotic, or even poetic or rhetorical, despite the doubts expressed about sophistic arts and patriotic poetry. This, despite the thematic subtitle of the *Greater Hippias* (“Of Beauty”), its thematic question (“What is the beautiful itself?” *Hip. Maj.* 286d), Hippias’s initial definition (“a beautiful maiden,” 287e), and the conspicuous indictment, in the *Lesser Hippias*, of Achilles’s heroic (noble) morals. The reason for this slighting of eros, Christopher Bruell has shown, is Hippias’s preoccupation with honor and power, that is, with beauty in the sense of nobility of deed.⁵ Hippias’s hero in *Greater* and *Lesser Hippias* proves to be Achilles the noble warrior (*Hip. Maj.* 292e–293a; *Hip. Min.* 363b, 364b, d–e, etc.); Aphrodite is completely absent from the two dialogues. In the *Phaedrus*, it is Achilles who is completely absent, while Aphrodite, goddess of erotic attraction, has a starring if brief role as the divine authority at a crucial transition from critique of eros to praise of eros (242d).

What then is the broad argument we are examining? Considered as a treatment of beauty, the *Phaedrus* moves from reminders of undeniable natural beauties (230b–c), to a mixed picture of beauty’s role in erotic love in particular, to the use and abuse of poetic and rhetorical speech. One might distinguish three chief parts of this movement: the three speeches first questioning and then more or less defending erotic love; the extended concluding dialogue about beautiful speech; and, as a subordinate collectivity, the three little dialogues first introducing topic and characters and then explaining the transitions between the speeches. However one counts the disparate parts,

³ G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s “Phaedrus”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4–5.

⁴ *Greater Hippias*, trans. David R. Sweet, in *The Roots of Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 307–39. For *Lesser Hippias*, I rely largely on an unpublished translation by Dr. Amy Nendza, for which I am very grateful.

⁵ Christopher Bruell, *On the Socratic Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 86–92.

nevertheless, the whole seems united in a poetic drama of sex-and-love rhetoric. It is not only a treatise on love, poetry, and rhetoric, but also a rhetorical and poetic exemplification of the *Phaedrus's* lessons in writing. Socrates tries to persuade Phaedrus as to who and what is worthy of his favors and love. It is certainly a drama of speech about speeches. Still, all the speech and speeches involve efforts, right to the end, at seduction and the role of beauty therein. But seduction to what?

The action begins with Socrates's insistence on hearing a written speech of Lysias, a famous rhetorician who is Phaedrus's boyfriend. This speech urges gratifying not the lover but the nonlover. Most unromantic. Lysias's unromantic speech touches but rarely on beauty as part of erotic attraction, at least explicitly.⁶ In the two analyses of eros by Socrates, however, beauty is central. The first mentions "the pleasure of beauty" in its attempt to define love, heavy and doubting though that attempt seems. Eros is "desire without reason which masters the opinion striving toward what's correct [*orthon*] and is led toward the pleasure of beauty, and which in turn mightily gaining strength from desires akin to itself toward the beauty of bodies, conquers in its leading" (238b–c). Beauty involves pleasure, notably in beautiful bodies, but here earns no praise for that. Still, such defining merely by powerful desire proves inadequate as to both love and beauty. Powerful desire does not always just roll over opinion as to what is right. This definition slights the influence of scruples. Only near the end of his second speech, culminating in a famous analysis of falling in love, does Socrates clarify what is beauty and what its influence in erotic love. Admittedly, his clarification is not the "many's common understanding," focused on pleasure and sex. It is instruction for select "initiates," restrained somewhat by awe before beauty (249a–c, 251a–b, 255a–257b). Besides, even lovers more or less moderate in pursuit of beauty want something in addition: they want a certain kind of beloved, however beautiful, and thus try to shape their beloved to what they want or wish, that is, in very different ways (252c–e).⁷ Beauty is not everything for lovers. Nor is it only a source of pleasure. It can be trouble, for select few as well as indiscriminating many. There is a reason Socrates treats of love under

⁶ David Levy detected Lysias's quiet allusions. *Eros and Socratic Political Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 56–57, 64–65. I have benefited repeatedly from Levy's careful and yet penetrating readings, which unfortunately extend too rarely, given his topic, to the dialogue's section on beautiful speech. I have benefited also from Ronna Burger's seminal *Plato's "Phaedrus": A Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

⁷ Nussbaum, "Poetry, Goodness, and Understanding," speaks of "moral beauty" and a corresponding respect for the "other as other" (101–2). These are not Plato's characteristic notions of beauty "within," whether the noble, awe before erotic beauty, or the philosophic.

the topic of madness, albeit divine madness, and only after two speeches preferring the nonlover as friend and even lover. To that extent Socrates's first speech complements his second.⁸ Even his speech celebrating love first subordinates love to the gods, wise poets, heavenly benefits, and pure forms before discussing erotic love at its best and, with it, beauty as even the best "of all inspirations" (249e). The divine madness of falling for a beautiful one should be constrained by wonder and awe, good judgment, and even, as it seems, a philosophic theology and philosophy itself.

But what of the noble, the beauty of shining deeds? What of admirable enterprises and the priority of heroes and the brave, that is, in effect, the topic of the *Greater* and *Lesser Hippias*? The *Phaedrus* barely touches on noble conduct and love of honor. When it does, Socrates repeatedly subordinates such virtuous ways to concerns for eros and truth. If concern for noble disposition appears, it is as a means to true love and to truth in public speaking.

Introducing his second speech, for example, Socrates apologizes for denigrating the lover in his first. He had forgotten a nobler loving, that is, love by one of "noble breeding and gentle character" (*gennadas kai pra(i)os to ēthos*, 243c). Similarly, the famous poetic image of the soul tormented by love is of a charioteer controlling two horses, one "noble and good and of such ancestry" (*kalos te kai agathos kai ek toioutōn*, 246b), the second the opposite. So with respect to speeches: a truly beautiful speech must be true or just, and thus likely to involve a willingness for noble sacrifice. "For someone who attempts noble [*kalois*] things, it is noble [*kalon*] even to suffer whatever it befalls him to suffer" (274a–b).

Even this space for noble doing is attenuated, however. Near dialogue's end, when the conversation concludes playfully as to boyfriends, Socrates's Isocrates as well as Phaedrus's Lysias, we are shown a corrected understanding of the noble. It focuses on ancestry. There is a connection between the noble—now the "nobly born" (*ēthei gennikōterōi*) character of Isocrates's upbringing—and good love, now inspiring the good of thoughtfulness or even philosophy. "For by nature, my friend, a certain philosophy is present in the man's thought" (279a–b). Nature cultivated by noble upbringing: is that a fertile soil for philosophy and thus the higher use of nobility? The *Phaedrus* ends with Socrates praying that he become "beautiful [*kalōi*] within" and that external things (including moderate wealth) be friendly (*philia*) to

⁸ As Grube contends: G. M. A Grube, *Plato's Thought*, ed. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), 106n11.

things within (279b–c). Corrected nobility is the proper ordering of the soul within to seek and teach truth, not a sacrificial struggle to impose truth on intractable forces.

What then is beautiful/noble speech, and, in particular, “What then is the manner of writing beautifully/nobly, and not” (258d)? The *Phaedrus*’s inquiry as to love and beauty culminates in a distinct inquiry into the beauty of speeches and especially of written speeches. It is the dialogue’s longest section, more than half again longer, in particular, than Socrates’s famous speech examining erotic love. The discussion brings full circle the drama, which begins with Phaedrus, lover of beautiful speeches, holding as beloved his beloved Lysias’s written speech. But it also brings full circle the argument. Socrates explains the three speeches that came before, and, moreover, outlines the logos guiding drama and tales alike. The discussion exhibits the dependence of “likenesses” upon truths; it thus also explains how serious judgments of beauty depend upon knowledge. Simply put, this culminating and dialectical section supplies the “logos” for learning—in preference to reputation, beautiful image, or pleasurable feeling. The argument reaches to the comprehensive human good. It promises “as much happiness as is possible for a human being” (277a). It therefore supplies what the *Greater Hippias* left missing (*Hip. Maj.* 304c–e).

What then is beauty of speech and of written speech in particular? The obvious answer is rhetoric and poetry, which human beings admire and in which they take pleasure. But what of honors, laws, authoritative customs, and sciences, kinds of speech that human beings also admire and look up to? The *Phaedrus* examines also these forms of beautiful/noble speech. While in this examination Phaedrus generally praises the arguments’ beauty, Socrates shows how Phaedrus’s concerns require at each stage a kind of truth, be it honesty, useful deception, or knowledge of our nature and its good.

The examination is dialectical and proceeds via five different objections, three by Phaedrus and two by Socrates. But there is also a preargument, that is, an introductory preparation of Phaedrus for serious argument. Some preparation is needed. Phaedrus proves complacent as to both ruling customs and the soft pleasures of beauty and the muses. This aesthete, as we might say, is intellectually soft.

BEAUTY AND COMPLACENCY

While Phaedrus found Socrates's grand defense of eros "more beautiful" than his critical first speech, he intimated doubt whether its austere conclusions "are better for us" (257c). Is it good "for us" and in particular for Lysias and himself? His doubts spur the turn to the topic of beautiful speech. Boy-friend Lysias may appear inferior as to beautiful writing, and, moreover, he may even be reluctant so to write, given the disdain of the powerful for such folderol.⁹ Out of "love of honor," as Phaedrus puts it, Lysias may fear a bad reputation among the city's powerful and "august," who equate speechwriting with the despised sophists (257c–d). Phaedrus hesitates out of love and fear, especially fear of a bad reputation among the ruling powers (who seem, as "august" [*semnotatoi*, 257d], also revered powers).

In reply, Socrates at first addresses only the supposed skepticism of rulers for speeches, but the argument also questions the sacredness of what the powerful uphold. Their actions belie their words. Political men, too, seek honor through writings. They attach their name to laws, do they not? And are laws "anything other than a written speech?" (258b). Phaedrus, lover of speeches, goes along with this desanctifying, as Hippias, lover of fame and political power, would not (*Hip. Maj.* 296a, 304a–b). Socrates then explicitly further undermines customary and godly reverence. Are not these revered writings in cities and monarchies but some ruler's device for godlike immortality? A founder's ambition for immortality—that is the real cause of his hunger for revered law. Lycurgus, Solon, and Darius made themselves "a deathless speechwriter" in the city—thus to consider themselves "equal to a god" (258 b–c). What is shameful, then, is not to write beautifully but to write "shamefully and badly" (*kakos* 258d). Whereupon Socrates poses the question as to all writing, private as well as public, poetic as well as prosaic: "What then is the manner of writing beautifully, and not?" (258d). But now the question is comprehensive and involves the question of good and bad living. At the prospect of such an inquiry Phaedrus the lover of speeches now waxes euphoric. For what would one live "but for the sake of such pleasures," as opposed to "slavish" pleasures of the body (258d–e)?

Which leads Socrates to a second and more thematic preargument: a caution against the pleasures of song, dance, and the muses generally. This caution addresses directly what is good and bad for life. The problem is not

⁹ Lysias's written speech had justified gratification of nonlovers, some of whom might well be of the powerful.

only authoritative custom and bodily pleasures that mislead. We are given a charming little tale of lazy persons turned cicadas. The tale warns this “man who loves music” (259b) precisely against the more intellectual charms wrought by the muses: “just as the many,” not conversing in the heat of noon, are “dozing and bewitched” by the muses “through idleness of thought” (259a). Charming speech is not necessarily wise speech. The lover of beautiful speeches must overcome the soft complacency of musical pleasures as well as the force of bodily pleasures and this for many reasons, including honor. “We must talk,” agrees Phaedrus. Wakeful speaking and writing call for pain and work as well as pleasure and spontaneity (259d–e).

RHETORIC AS ART

Whereupon Socrates ends the preparatory arguments and advances the thesis that pervades the remaining inquiry. For things “well and beautifully said,” must not the speaker already know “the truth” about the things he is going to say? And Phaedrus replies with the conventional and crucial objection that he has “heard” and that will also recur. Beautiful speech is persuasive speech, and for persuasion it is enough to learn not the truth, but what will “seem” true to “the multitude who will give judgment.” One needs to know not the things truly “good or beautiful/noble, but that will seem so” (259e–260a).

Whereupon Socrates agrees that these words, which he (unlike Phaedrus) attributes to “the wise,” must be considered. But not yet. Why not? It seems that this sophistication of the “wise” cannot be adequately answered before a reminder of the obvious: the obvious primacy of truth and obvious harm of untruths. Obvious to whom? Socrates reminds Phaedrus, whom he here calls a “good man,” of the goodness of truth telling and the badness of lies. His example is of the badness: to praise as good a faulty weapon may endanger the individual and the city that rely on it (260b–d). Socrates then generalizes: a rhetorical art “ignoring good and bad” can harm. Phaedrus is moved by this appeal to his honesty and justice: his soul is what Socrates later calls “many-colored” (277c; cf. 270d, 271a–b). An orator must address the various relevant colors, that is, the obstacles and aids to persuasion. Nevertheless, this section is brief and notably incomplete. What of rhetoric’s powers in persuading to good and true things? What of the need for persuasion to do what is good? Alternatively, can the truth harm? And is there a use for half truths and lies? Perhaps the brevity as to honesty in principle reflects its weakness, even often an apparent irrelevance, amid the particular alternatives actually presenting themselves for choice by the human animal. Phaedrus is moved

by particular prevailing opinions, by what he “has heard,” and he is drawn too to other goods—not least to honor.

It is Socrates, not Phaedrus, who now proceeds to raise the second objection to his thesis, an objection that indeed proclaims the irrelevance of truth *per se*. This objection is not from hearsay, but on behalf of the “art of speeches” as such, that is, of the so-called wise. Now is the time for *the* argument on the other side. Socrates presents it as if from a subsisting art proudly “technical,” as we say, that is, as existing, competent, and independent of good and bad. (He presents it as a “she,” whatever the relevance of that, and she speaks for herself.) Ms. Rhetoric, indeed, ignores the claims of good and bad while tacitly acknowledging independence from the pursuit of truth. Still, while she is silent about good and bad, she defends herself as to rhetoric’s alleged neutrality as to truth. She does not prevent people from knowing the truth. And she does maintain “this big thing”: without her, those who know the truth can never “persuade by art” (260d). Ms. Rhetoric’s big claim is that rhetoric is a rational guide to persuasion without being knowledge of truth. Socrates intimates that “the wise” take the existence of truth for granted while in effect denying its priority. In the remainder of the dialogue Socrates attempts to show the art’s dependence on truth. A conclusion: a splendid speech of persuasion requires knowledge, knowledge of (the relevant) human types and the arguments capable of moving each. But this conclusion depends upon the introduction of “true” rhetoric.

The argument begins with a series of extraordinary Socratic reasonings to show that the lady “lies,” that is, there is no genuine art of speaking without “grasping the truth” (260d–e). These assertions are themselves radically unconventional. In fact, they are shockingly beyond conventional moral and political goodness. Socrates contends in turn for the radical extent of our guidance by invented speech, the centrality of deception in inventing persuasive speeches, and the dependence of superior deception upon knowledge of the thing. To be a good liar one must know what one is talking about. Finally, and amazingly, we are shown, nevertheless, that the true standard for speeches (“how to pass over from blaming to praising”) lies in truth telling (265c; cf. 277a–e). The secret lies in a select audience and a selective form of telling.

PERSUASION AND LIKENESSES

There follow in the *Phaedrus* three clarifications of the true and comprehensive form of rhetoric. First, Socrates generalizes and explains. Just as his two speeches had divided love into sexual desire, “reviled” out of “justice,”

and awe, praised as “divine” (266a), so the speaker must single out a topic and its forms according to his thesis. Poetry is subordinate to rhetoric properly understood, and the rhetorician must argue as fits his end, such as justice or what is divine. Second, he must have a comprehensive rhetorical knowledge. Comprehensive, indeed. He must know not only the usual techniques now quickly reviewed (such as slander!), but also both the various kinds of souls, and the various kinds of arguments effective with each. And he must know even when and how to intervene. True rhetoric calls for extraordinary judiciousness in the relevant moment. The one example here is Pericles, for thirty-two years the ruler-in-effect of Athens’s restive and imperial democracy. Only such comprehensively practical knowledge makes the art “beautifully and perfectly” accomplished (272a). Only thus can one act nobly/beautifully (274a–b), with pleasure “in everything” (273e). Beauty in speech thus appears as an art of speaking perfectly to any and all occasions. Looks have little to do with it. The measure is the “fitting,” the “suitable,” the “measured.” And yet, third, despite arriving by argument at this perfection of practical art, Socrates finally denigrates it in favor of another sort of rhetoric, written speech that yields play for the writer, safety from the many, and serious education for a select few. That combination alone offers “as much happiness as is possible for a human being” (277a).

Why this turn to written speech? Is it that the practical knowledge required is impossible to acquire? (But Pericles.) Or is the more likely difficulty in this perfect rhetoric actually persuading the unknowing to follow the knowing? Failure is all too likely. Pericles gone, the ensuing leaders ignored his counsels of moderation and public spirit, and even Pericles’s own final speech chastises the Athenians for their ingratitude.¹⁰ Sacrifice and suffering, not happiness, seem to Socrates the likely reward for great virtue. The sacrifice may be “beautiful/noble” (274a–b). It is not good for the rational, or good for happiness either. And is a rational art of persuasion rational if it cannot persuade? So Socrates’s revised art of the written speech: it aims to persuade, or rather to teach, only the susceptible, that is, the actual or potential lovers of knowing. There is implied another consideration: a more consistent rationality.

Socrates explains the more rational way by explaining his move from reproach of the lover in his first speech to “praise” of the lover in the second. It is by distinguishing kinds, that is, kinds of love. As if by chance, he turns

¹⁰ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 2.60–61, 64–66.

to the mind's capacities to gather together and to distinguish. These abilities may seem to appear rather "by chance," in life as in this conversation. But they are "necessary," crucial, even natural. The gathering brings dispersed things together under "one idea." The dividing can "cut apart by forms," not arbitrarily, but "according to where the joints have naturally grown" (265c–266c). Mankind and armadillo are alike natural animals but also of distinct natural kinds. Nature shows itself as measure of knowing. Plato's vast art is various, but from its start is not subjective, merely personal, or relativistic.¹¹

We seem to have reached the core of rationality, that is, of speech's activity in knowing what is. "Naturally" occurs three times in this cluster; "nature," once. But what is certain is that we have reached the core, the nature, of Socrates's love, which is also and accordingly not arbitrary. Socrates emphasizes his devotion and its authority. "I myself...am a lover of these dividings apart and bringings together, so that I may be capable of speaking and thinking" (266b). This decisive rational and natural authority even seems to be Socrates's warrant for holding something "divine." If someone else has this power to see "the things that have naturally grown into one and toward many," Socrates pursues him as "a god." Still, and accordingly, the divinization proves to be but a likeness, an "as if." Socrates makes a point that he does the actual naming. The dividing and gathering is to be called "dialectical," a mental interaction, not a divine revelation (266b–c).

This Socratic profession of natural love is the clarifying peak, the intellectual high point, of Plato's *Phaedrus*. It brings to theoretical clarity Socrates's initial profession of a "love of learning" (*philomathēs* [230d], not *eros*). But it is not the rhetorical high point, either for clarity or for drama.

This account of speechifying is immediately challenged in *Phaedrus*'s third and final objection. Excellently "dialectical" this account may be, but it is too rational. We still neglect the "rhetorical." And Socrates, recurring to language of beauty, but retaining the authority of reason, is open to the challenge. Has "some beautiful/noble thing" been left out of the class of things rational, that is, grasped by art (266c–d)? Thus reminded "beautifully" of what leading rhetoricians already expound, and of the need to speak to the multitude, Socrates leads *Phaedrus* on a quick survey of the "remaining part" of rhetoric. They review conventional techniques from preface, to refutation, to recapitulation. Some ten contributors earn notice, including Gorgias,

¹¹ Cf. Drew A. Hyland's discussion in his admirable *Plato and the Question of Beauty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 126–35.

Prodicus, Thrasymachus, and, no less, Hippias. Techniques coolly mentioned include “probabilities,” slandering and dispelling slanders (these from Thrasymachus), and other “beautiful/noble” things, such as (from Thrasymachus again) “piteously wailing over old age and poverty” (266d–267d). The usual admirable rhetoric could seem a management of dishonesty and foolishness.

But is it an art? Whereupon Socrates proceeds to measure this conventional rhetoric not by honesty or truthfulness, but by the superior ingenuity of the truly knowing speaker. One must play the ball where it lies, as they say of golf, and the lie of rhetoric is the murky rough of popular opinion, fear, and hope. Socrates examines this art for what is useful in such circumstances to a truly knowing master of persuasion. What is the true orator’s armory? It is especially knowledge of the different forms of soul, of the speeches suitable to move each type, and of to whom, when, and how they should be applied.

The crucial criticism of the conventional art of rhetoric is of the last: its incomplete rationality as to practical circumstance. A focus on technique is inadequate. Suppose someone knew how to give a drug or cause a vomit, but not to whom, when, or how long—and yet claimed to be a doctor. He would be “mad,” pronounces Phaedrus (268c). What, then, is the comprehensive knowledge needed for a master rhetorician? Socrates begins with a caution, that is, by stating a natural limit. You must be “by nature rhetorical” (269d). Nature again. Only after that grave piece of sobriety does he explain the knowledge required.

Socrates’s initial example of a superlative rhetorician is of some nature indeed: Pericles, the great manager of the Athenian demos (269e–270a). And the distinctive knowledge described is itself of some nature. It is not of everyday talk, but indeed of how to orate “concerning nature,” that is, nature understood as the horizon of human life, especially the heavens and the mind. In addition to his “good nature” Pericles was a master of “babbling and talk about what’s above,” thus of conveying “high-mindedness” and bringing things to “perfection.” This is nature as material of rhetoric, not of science. Indeed, it is nature as material of poetry, not only rhetoric. Such facility as to the heavens, albeit under the heading of nature, Pericles obtained by associating with the philosopher Anaxagoras, who was himself of “good nature” and filled with talk as to such and as to “the nature of mind and mindfulness” (269e–270a). Is the beginning of rhetorical good sense a certain inspiring good sense about the gods and the rule of mind, as in the palinode’s theology? Evidently philosophy (a certain philosophy) can help, as did Anaxagoras’s

and Socrates's improvement on Anaxagoras's. Does Socrates here suggest some version of Neo-Platonism for its rhetorical efficacy?

With that politic start, soon reformulated as a need to know "the nature of the whole" (270c), Socrates turns to the need to know the forms, simple or multiple, of the things to be artful about. For rhetoric the thing is the soul, as for medicine, the body. This discussion of soul is sprinkled with eleven words containing the root "nature" (270c–271a).

Still, the discussion focuses less on the soul as such and more on the various forms of soul. Yes, nature and soul appear as somehow the measure. But what they prescribe, what is the good form or perfection that befits human nature—that is disputed. There are "oppositions" as to what is just, good, or noble/beautiful. *That* variety of opinions and of kinds of souls is what the rhetorician must know, and that, indeed, is how different souls—Phaedrus, Hippias, Thrasymachus, or Donald Trump—appear before us. One must consider what each kind "naturally" inclines to and will suffer and, of the various classes of speeches, what each can effect with what kind of soul. It seems a limitless consideration. But that is not all. One must recognize, too, the practical situation: that a certain "nature" is present, when and where a certain reaction is called for, what sort of speech to apply (for example, "brief speaking and piteous appeal, and terrible exacerbation"), when to intervene. Pericles, indeed. Only thus, Socrates insists, can the art be "beautifully and perfectly" accomplished (270b–272a).

But we are also prepared for Phaedrus's doubt—this is "no small matter"—and for Socrates's introduction, as if in confirming reply, of an objection (his second and last), which he has "heard" as "just." This "just" objection is "the wolf's position." There is no need for such a high and difficult care for truth about justice and the good. Given the actual working of the law courts, notably in "accusation and in defense speech," it is enough to know what seems just, good, and noble to the multitude. This echoes broadly Phaedrus's initial objection, consideration of which Socrates postponed (259e–260a, 260a–261b), and here considers. But here, in this reconsideration of popular justice, we see how powerful and radical is its error. This erring justice now appears as authoritative justice, the justice of courts and assemblies, and it contradicts, we are here brought to confront, the authority of reason and truth. Now Socrates calls it an animal's outlook. Recall the previous mention of a wolf: the nonlover who cares for boys as "wolves cherish lambs" (241d), that is, as predators. Accordingly, he who expends the immense labor needed for a rational art of rhetoric is a naif, an endangered naif headed to a bad end.

In popular assemblies (not least judicial assemblies) “no one has any care for truth,” but for persuasion, and the key to persuasion is what is probable, “bidding many a farewell to the true.” The probable in turn is “what conforms to the opinion of the multitude.” Rhetoric seems to concern elementally accusation and defense before the demos. Socrates alludes repeatedly to the early rhetorician Tisias, who specialized in forensic rhetoric (272c–273c, 267a).¹²

Socrates’s initial rebuttal of vulpine or common rhetoric had relied on a decent Phaedrus’s decency. Phaedrus could be revolted by lies leading to obvious injustice: cheating a confidant, say, or endangering one’s country (260b–d). This second rebuttal cannot. This time the rhetorician’s carelessness with the truth presents itself as the obviously “just,” what most people think, such as how else will I get my son off. Instead, Socrates relies on what the intervening argument has established—not the authority of another (and just) opinion, but the consistency of the argument. The multitude’s probabilities spring up through “likeness with the truth,” and as to likenesses, knowers of the truth know precisely “most beautifully how to find them.” Accordingly, only those who can both enumerate the various natures of the audience and distinguish the beings by forms, and thus by one *idea* for each thing, can master the art of rhetoric. Without this knowledge, no orator can be “artful about speeches” to the extent “humanly possible.” True rhetoric, that is the standard. And the means to such an intellectual power is “much diligent study” (*pragmateias*) (273d–e).

But is not this superior power to devise likenesses in effect a superior power to devise lies, even very comprehensive lies? Might the grand artist of appearances be a magnet for popular favor and thus himself even a wolf-like demagogue? Socrates addresses this possibility immediately, in the following sentence, no less. He calls upon “the moderate man” (*sōphrona*, or “man of sound mind,” 273e–274a) and then, when difficulties appear in practice, he questions the authority of the arts, as such, and calls upon the philosopher. *Logos* retains authority, in the philosopher, the arts, and in a likeness in practice, the moderate man.

Moderation in politics, however, runs into the problem of the wolf. And so in practice the knowingly moderate man must perfect himself with a view to a perfect art, even a divine and noble art. He is not to speak and act “toward human beings,” but to gratify “the gods,” and himself “to act in a gratifying fashion in everything” to the extent of his power (274e). Or, now as if from

¹² Nichols, *Phaedrus*, n161 to 267a.

“wiser” men: a man of “intelligence” (*noun*) should not work to please “fellow slaves,” except “on the side,” but masters who are “good” and even of “good ancestry.” “Except as work on the side”: this quiet qualification leaves room secondarily for political help (274a). But even elemental public things such as a Tisias promises will be “most beautiful” if they arise from serious knowledge. And here Phaedrus chimes in: this is said “altogether beautifully.” But the problem of possibility arises still. Can or will anyone in practice so act for right and the best people? Which prepares Socrates’s apparent, but austere noble, conclusion: for one devoted to the beautiful/noble, it is beautiful “even to suffer whatever it befalls him to suffer” (274a–b). The focus of this conclusion is on suffering: a politics of truth seems a realm of sacrifice, albeit noble sacrifice. Still, let it not be missed: even in this dialogue on love Plato allows some room and tribute, backhanded as they may be, for noble deeds.

Is it the grave public impracticability of truthful argument that causes Socrates’s immediate turn: from the art of beautiful/noble speeches to the seemliness and unseemliness (*euprepeias...kai aprepeias*, 274b) of written speeches? Or is it that the noble art results in neither good nor happiness? Or are these alternatives equivalent?

BEAUTIFUL WRITING FOR INGENIOUS TEACHING

What is certain is the turn right here to written speech. There is a turn, too, in substance. Socrates turns in the dialogue’s final arguments to seek not a true art of political speech, but a politic art of true speech. True rhetoric proves to be an art of protecting and educating the few suitably inclined, not of popularity—not of pleasing the “whole mob” (277e). The measure is “seemliness” or rather the “fitting,” grasped by one who “understands”—not the beautiful/noble, or what perception and feeling find striking and pleasant (275e). Serious beauty proves to be the fitting written speech. Often playful as to likenesses (remember those horses!), it induces serious learning in suitable souls, while hiding its radical unconventionality from unsuitable souls. The final section begins with indications, both playful and serious, of characteristically Socratic types of fitting likenesses (274c–277a).

Socrates starts by invoking in turn god (not the Greek gods), then men of former times (but not as ancestors to be worshiped), and finally the truth if found by “we ourselves.” He begins with a story of an (Egyptian) “old god,” named differently by different peoples and by Socrates, too, who calls him

also a “demon” (274c).¹³ This god invented written letters (as well as number, calculation, geometry, and other crucial intellectual arts). He approaches the king “of all Egypt,” wanting him to spread this new art of writing as a cure for ignorance and forgetfulness. But the story does not turn worshipful. The king—or is it the god Ammon of the place?—corrects the god. To invent an art is one thing, the king instructs; to judge its harm or benefit, another. This art spreads not wisdom but an opinion of one’s wisdom. It is at best only a reminder to those who already know.

But the argument does not rest with this political puncturing of the revered expert’s hopes for general enlightenment. Socrates proceeds to offer a fresh analysis of written speeches and of how to use them, for those who know. The philosopher corrects the politically wise king, who also now seems, through an attribution of his “prophecy” to Ammon, a legendary divinity (274d–275c). Legendary rulers are themselves authoritative as (merely) revered. They are accordingly to be respected, but also questioned.

While here too Socrates relies on likenesses, the likenesses are of human powers, not of powers above. They are like arts of communicating (thus painting), and of planting seeds of independent beings (thus farming). The argument distinguishes the playfulness of writing beautiful (fitting) speech from the seriousness of inquiring speech. It culminates in showing the thing itself, that is, the wisdom to be communicated and seeded. That is the truly beautiful speech.

Writing resembles painting in this: it conveys a fixed message, but can neither defend nor explain itself. It cannot keep its assertion from “those to whom it is in no way fitting” (275d–e, 277a), nor explain it to those “wishing to learn.” It breeds a people foolishly opinionated and unpleasant. Whereupon Socrates questions these supposed limitations. Might there be a more “naturally” powerful speech, written with power to defend itself, which knows how

¹³ Drew Hyland’s interpretation of the section on beautiful speech essentially starts at this point (*Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 118). I have benefited from Hyland’s loving readings and findings. But in slighting Socrates’s introductory thoughts on writing, Hyland slights the radical scope, necessity, and natural basis of Socrates’s plans for reform. This, despite remarking on the “matter for thought” that concerns in different ways the various dialogues, including this one (128). Simply put, Socrates’s poetic way is a way of argument; it advances defining principles which in turn allow for “sciences of just and beautiful and good things” (276c). It advances, too, a rhetoric and poetry for philosophy, that is, for those seeking sciences. It does not merely induce “philosophy as a way of life,” “a life of questioning” (134) that seeks a “non-discursive” part of philosophy that cannot be put in words (94, 104–5, 134). After all, in the *Phaedrus* itself Socrates puts into words the “natural” “kinds” somehow given to us, as well as the “gathering” and “dividing” that a philosopher or scientist must do in clarifying them.

both “to speak and to keep silent”? Consider the “farmer” with “intelligence” (276b). He plants seeds “he is serious about” where it is “fitting,” expecting germination months away. He deals only in “play and festivity” with those that “become beautiful” as eight-day wonders. (Note that the plants he is serious about are not called “beautiful.”) The serious farmer plants for food; if he plants for beauty, it is “only for play and festivity.”

Would one with “sciences of just and beautiful and good things” have “less intelligence as to his own seeds” than the farmer? No. This knower can plant his seeds of intelligence with speeches able to select suitable recipients, to “assist themselves with argument,” and, no less, “to teach true things competently” (276c). And as for the writer, he writes for the sake of play and of reminders for himself in the forgetfulness of old age.

Accordingly, Socrates “judge[s]” the art of speeches by dividing knowing. The knowing writer knows “the soul’s nature” and “forms.” He knows, too, the classes of speeches suitable for “each nature” and the joy of seeding speeches of learning—as opposed to “political speeches” (277a–278b). He knows not least the superiority of the composer who writes with that understanding, whether in speeches, poetry, or laws. The choice of names is again indicative. The truly understanding writer may be named “philosopher,” not merely the usual “speechwriter,” “law writer,” or “poet” (ordinary names that Socrates now acknowledges). The peak of beauty is philosophic and esoteric writing such as Shakespeare’s plays or, of course, Plato’s dialogues and Aristotle’s treatises.

Phaedrus, at least, finds “altogether beautiful” this play in speeches with tales of “justice” and other such topics. Once again, however, his lightness and wonder must be corrected. “Much more beautiful,” says Socrates, is the serious teaching of a “fitting soul.” He plants speeches able to defend themselves “and him who planted,” speeches that have seed for other speeches in other souls, “naturally growing,” that can pass this on, “ever deathless” (276a–277a). The poet-philosopher also protects himself and has his own taste of immortality. Here is what Phaedrus praises as “indeed still more beautiful” and what Socrates, measured to the end, allows to be as much “happiness” as a human being can have. This is the added attraction of the serious track that our opinions of beauty demand when seriously examined. Socrates, at the end of Plato’s tale, calls this the “beautiful in respect to the things within” (279b).

The dialogue indeed ends by recurring to the level of boyfriends and beauty/nobility, but now as informed by wisdom and the priority of soul (278b–279c). While Socrates advances a judgment of “beauty,” it is as part of a prayer, and removed from bodily quality. Deprecating “gold,” he prays for beauty of the “things within.” His boyfriend Isocrates is superior to Phaedrus’s Lysias by knowledge of “nature,” a “more nobly born character,” and a “divine impulse,” which proves to be “a certain philosophy” in his “thought” (*dianoia*). And then there are the intelligently fitting last words. At the beginning of the section, Phaedrus treated Socrates’s appeal to ancient wisdom, which is of the gods, as “ridiculous” (274b–c). Now he responds “of course” when asked if they should pray, and as a friend he would share with Socrates a prayer for things within. He is opened more to wonder, friendship, and prudence of speech, as well as to the complications of eros and indeed of beauty. But this man of beautiful speech remains dependent on the philosopher Socrates to select the god.

What delight Plato must have felt in writing this beautiful dialogue.

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