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EVALUATING RHETORIC AND WRITING, AGAIN: ANALYZING *PHAEDRUS* 259E-279C

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While reading Plato's *Phaedrus*, I realized that to understand and truly appreciate the subtleties of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c, we should read it not only as philosophers, but also as literary critics. Building upon that insight, I began to see that any interpretation of the *Phaedrus* should use some analytic techniques from literary theory and criticism, preferably exegetical close reading, to unify the various threads of philosophical content scattered throughout this dialogue into a coherent philosophical and literary work. Naturally, I came to notice that this act of unification enables the *Phaedrus* to fit into Plato's overarching project of examining the human psyche, criticizing the failings of his contemporary culture, and advancing various philosophical hypotheses through the use of literary devices. After stumbling upon these insights, I came to understand that a philosophical-literary interpretation of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c should help us not only comprehend but also appreciate the value of Plato's portrayal of the superiority of innovative, dialectical *logos*, as exemplified by Socratic dialectic, over traditional rhetorical and written *logoi*.

However, instead of dedicating my efforts to substantiate the legitimacy of the assertions made above, I hope the reader will humor me by accepting at least the plausibility of these assertions and let me present such a philosophical-literary analysis. To perform this task, I have divided my paper into two sections. Section 1 is an abbreviated close reading of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c. Section 2 compares my philosophical-literary interpretative analysis of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c with Jane Curran's analysis of the *Phaedrus* in her 1986 *Philosophy and Rhetoric* article, "Rhetorical Technique of the *Phaedrus*." Hopefully, by comparing my philosophical-literary interpretative approach with Curran's interpretative approach, I will demonstrate the value of interpreting Plato's *Phaedrus*, and consequently his other texts, using analytical techniques from both philosophy and literary criticism.

Section I: Reading *Phaedrus* 259e-279c

Rhetoric, Deficient and Genuine

I wish to begin my close reading of Plato's *Phaedrus in medias res* at the moment immediately after Socrates dismisses Phaedrus' initial depiction of rhetoric as being an absurd activity in 260d. At this point Socrates advances the working hypothesis that rhetoric is a *techne*, which every form of *logos* (i.e., speaking) has in common with one another. It is in Socrates' discussion of *logoi* as being the subject of rhetoric that he reveals the secret of performing persuasive rhetorical deception to Phaedrus:

> SOCRATES: At any rate, you are more likely to escape detection, as you shift from one thing to its opposite, if you proceed in small steps rather than in large ones.

PHAEDRUS: Without a doubt.

SOCRATES: Therefore, if you are to deceive someone else and to avoid deception yourself, you must know precisely the respects in which things are similar and dissimilar to one another.

PHAEDRUS: Yes, you must (262a).[1]

Unknown to Phaedrus Socrates has performed such rhetorical deception in this dialogue twice already: (1) when Socrates tells the story of an adult lover who pretends not to yearn for his beloved and, in the process, seduces his beloved by acting aloof, and (2) when Socrates incrementally shifts the conversation from criticizing Lysias' notion of love and the lover to discussing philosophy, with philosophic love portrayed as the purest and most desirable form of *eros* in his second speech (246a-253c). Socrates practices such rhetorical deception on Phaedrus because he wants Phaedrus to critically evaluate orators' speeches, including his own oratory, and through the cultivation of critical discernment in matter of rhetoric, Phaedrus will develop a genuine love for wisdom, and not simply a misdirected yearning for well-spoken, but empty, words.[2]

Several pages later, Socrates tells Phaedrus what makes a person capable of creating and performing an excellent speech. The orator must "[…] first make a systematic division and grasp the particular character of each of these two kinds of thing, both the kind where most people wander in different directions [i.e., where people disagree about the meaning of a term] and the kind where they do not [disagree about the meaning of a term]" (263b-c). Second, the orator "[…] must not be mistaken about his subject" (263c). That is, the orator must have enough knowledge about his or her subject matter to properly define it. Lysias—the archetypical Greek orator—does neither, and due to his neglect of these criteria, Lysias could not properly arrange the parts of his speech for the most rhetorical effect. Instead of birthing a living *logos*, Lysias' speech was born stillborn into the world and accomplished nothing more than reciting lifeless platitudes. Only dialectic, in Socrates' opinion, could birth any *logos* worthy of the pursuit of knowledge.

Introducing the Dialectical Method

Socrates goes on to describe the dialectic method as it applies to the art of rhetoric. Indeed, to focus on the mythical content of Socrates' speeches is to miss their most significant feature. The content of his speeches, as he admits in 265c-d, was mostly fanciful, and therefore ignorable. Yet, he contends that the dialectical structure of his speeches could rehabilitate rhetoric and transform it into a genuine *techne*. Socrates then announces the means of transforming rhetoric into a genuine art: a rhetorician must learn the method of dialectic.[3]

Throughout *Phaedrus* 264e-266d Socrates depicts dialectic as a method that classifies and arranges *doxa*. From his first speech onward, Socrates seems more interested in the method of manipulating and rearranging *doxai*, or opinions, than advancing any definitive thesis on love, and this section only makes his interest undeniably explicit to the reader. This classification and (re)arrangement of *doxai*, in turn, enables the dialecticians, or those who aspire to be dialecticians, to discard whatever opinions cannot withstand critical scrutiny and to retain and refine whatever opinions survive the withering assault of critical scrutiny since such opinions could assist the inquirer in her ongoing pursuit of knowledge (Gottfried 194).

Moreover, such systematic removal of imprecise and unreliable opinions lets a dialectician continue her inquiry with more reliable, warranted opinions.[4] Such a continual reevaluation and criticism of *doxai*, ultimately, should lead a dialectician to peer beyond the veil of sense perceptions and gaze at the Forms themselves, however temporary such an experience is for us mortals. In fact, Plato virtually declares that dialecticians should practice rhetoric insofar as its persuasive techniques assist others in pursuing knowledge.

Speech and Writing

For the sake of brevity, I will not critically evaluate Socrates' critique of traditional rhetoric in *Phaedrus* 266e-276b. Besides, focusing on Socrates' critique of writing in *Phaedrus* 274b-277a compensates for my neglect of Socrates' critique of traditional rhetoric. As I just mentioned above, Socrates shifts his discussion from the "art" of rhetoric back to the art of writing in *Phaedrus* 274b-277a. Socrates notes that in writing, as with rhetoric, writers communicate something to their readers *without* their readers being able to engage in a reciprocal, living *logos* with them; both of these *logoi* are thus static and subject to profound misinterpretations. Socrates demonstrates this detrimental aspect of writing (and rhetoric) via the myth of Theuth. In this myth, King Thamus tells Theuth, the inventor of writing, that genuine knowledge comes not from writing but only through the process of continuous dialectical conversations between two or more people. In such dialectical conversations, a teacher would ask her pupil a variety of questions and lead her pupil to ask relevant questions in a continuous back-and-forth dialogue until her pupil grasps some truth on her own.

Writing, then, leads its readers to think that they have actual knowledge when, in fact, they only have a hollow, linguistic facsimile of genuine truth. This passage has some similarities with an often-quoted passage from the *Seventh Letter*:

> For [dialectical] knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourished itself (*Seventh Letter* 341c-d).

In both *Phaedrus* 274b-277a, especially in 276-277, and the *Seventh Letter* 341c-d, the acquisition of knowledge comes only after a continuous, reciprocal dialogue between teacher and pupil(s). Non-dialectical *logoi*, particularly writing, ideally function as a linguistic reminder for those who already live a philosophic life to relive the joys, sorrows, and problems involved in living that sort of life. As a mimetic medium, writing, at its best, serves as a way of rekindling philosophical *eros* in a philosophical soul. For those who are completely ignorant of dialectic, they do not even get reminders of truths from written texts (or oratory); they receive nothing more than the mere appearance of knowledge. Nourished with such intellectual gruel and vacuous *logoi*, these people wallow in the filth of appearances, deceived into believing their souls are being edified by such dung. A dialectician, in contrast, realizes that only through the use of dialectic could she till the fertile ground of a willing and worthy pupil's soul and plant the seeds of knowledge there, hoping those seeds germinate and grow into a rich harvest of knowledge and love of wisdom.[5]

Socrates spends the remainder of *Phaedrus* (i.e., 277a-279c) summarizing the central contentions he advances throughout this dialogue. What *Phaedrus* does as a dialogue, as shown in 259e-279c, is portray the inferiority of non-dialectical *logoi*, particularly rhetoric, to dialectical *logos*. Arguing against Lysias' notion of rhetoric, Socrates contends that, ideally, a true rhetorician who could practice his art well would not be a rhetorician at all, but a philosopher. Only a philosopher could integrate the art of rhetoric with the dialectic method's precision to craft well-constructed speeches with true content, presented by a speaker who could alter any aspect of her speech to convince any person listening of its validity and persuade that person to listen to her speech. What makes the *Phaedrus* even more ironic is that Plato himself, through the character of Socrates, serves as the paradigmatic rhetorical dialectician, even though he does not claim himself to be a dialectician, but simply a lover of the ideal dialectician (266c).

Section II: Critical Response to Jane Curran's "Rhetorical Technique of the *Phaedrus*"

Section 1 could stand as a self-sufficient interpretation of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c. Yet, to demonstrate the necessity of a literary analysis to fully expose the *Phaedrus'* underlying philosophical content requires me to compare my philosophical-literary interpretative approach with a more standard philosophical interpretative approach. I chose Jane Curran's article, "Rhetorical Technique in the *Phaedrus*," to represent the philosophical interpretative approach for a couple of reasons. First, we both have a similar interpretation of the *Phaedrus* since we both argue that the entire *Phaedrus* has "rhetorical persuasive impact" and "that the sections of the *Phaedrus* which are not actually speeches exercise rhetorical persuasion as well" (Curran 70). Secondly, I agree with her assessment of the *Phaedrus* as a dialogue where "Socrates persuades Phaedrus by delivering speeches which contain, and were themselves contained within dialectic structure. [...] Plato appeals to us, by allowing his work to express a criticism of itself, thereby leading us beyond its particular form" (Curran 71).

Despite our agreements, I contend that Curran's neglect to do a close reading of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c leads her to overestimate the status of rhetoric in Plato's thought. She sees Plato as "provid[ing] the tools for rhetoric [through the persona of Socrates] to gain respectability [...]" while ignoring the obvious fact that Plato thought rhetoric could gain respectability only if it serves to enhance the persuasiveness of dialectic (Curran 71). For rhetoric to gain respectability, then, it must cease to act as an independent discipline. I do not know of many, if any, contemporary professors of composition and rhetoric who would accept Plato's rehabilitation of rhetoric. While Curran accurately portrays the spirit of Plato's pragmatic use of rhetoric as a tool to advance Socratic dialectic in her essay, she fails to portray Plato's disregard for rhetoric when uncoupled from its service to philosophical inquiry.[6]

Upon critical examination of *Phaedrus* 259e-279c, I find her interpretation of *Phaedrus* difficult to substantiate given Plato's continual denouncement of rhetoric whenever practiced by anyone other than philosophers. Had she conducted a closer reading of *Phaedrus*, she would have noticed the questionable nature of her assertion, "Plato has managed, without being present as orator, to appeal to his readers' souls, and to write his message on them[,]" since the text does not adequately support that claim (Curran 71). In accordance with the imagery favored by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, a more apt metaphor for what Plato attempts to do in his writing is to plant seeds of knowledge in the souls of his readers. Extending this metaphor further, I would say that Plato uses written dialogues to help till the spiritual soil of those who could serve as the appropriate ground for such seeds to germinate and flourish. Writing is a less-than-ideal means of igniting the flames of philosophical *eros* in the readers' souls. But no one should confuse this endeavor with an activity that tries to communicate truths simply by re-presenting them like Curran does when she wrote, "[Plato's dialogues] contain truth expressed in dialogue form—a form which is above all flexible" (Curran 71).

Another reason Plato thought writing and non-dialectical oral communication will always remain deficient is that no written text or rhetorical speech could tailor its message to specific readers or audience members. They do not allow writers or orators to clarify themselves whenever questions arise about their work. Ideally, these non-dialectical mediums of communication could simulate live, interactive dialectic enough to provoke the audience or reader to ask philosophical questions. Yet, no one should confuse thought-provoking texts with continual back-and-forth conversations between people dealing with live philosophical questions.

I do not fault Jane Curran for not examining the *Phaedrus* in this manner, for the interpretative model she chose to use in her analysis of the *Phaedrus* denied her that option just like my interpretative model prevents me from saying that Plato attempts to establish rhetoric as an independent and respectable discipline. To have interpreted the *Phaedrus* as primarily a text that defends rhetoric, without stressing Plato's warnings about the dangers of confusing the act of writing with the act of communicating truths, is to have neglected one of *the* central themes of the *Phaedrus*. In contrast, after examining *Phaedrus* 259e-279c via a critical close reading, we see that the danger of confusing written texts as adequate communicators of knowledge is a central motif of the *Phaedrus* and even heightens the persuasiveness of Plato's criticism of rhetoric and writing since he masterfully uses rhetorical writing to criticize both rhetoric and writing.

Unlike Curran, Plato is aware that writing does not guarantee that the reader will acquire knowledge simply from the act of reading a written text, for a written text cannot accommodate itself to the various dispositions, intelligences, and moods of its present readers and all the potential readers of that text. Beware writing, Plato warns, for it could extinguish philosophical *eros* or worse deceive people into believing that they are learning truths when, in fact, they are merely parroting what the writer inks on the page. The same is true of rhetorical speech as well. Plato says as much when he writes,

> You'd think [written words] were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not (275d-e).

To restate Plato's sentiments in contemporary philosophical terminology: All texts are embedded in their particular socio-historical milieu. When removed from their initial socio-historical milieu, they do not generally have the flexibility necessary to adapt to the linguistic norms, idioms, syntax, and performative aspects of ever-changing human societies. Thus, dialectic *logos* must breathe life into a text's lifeless linguistic symbols and open up a space

for us readers to participate in the ongoing pursuit of knowledge, with the text motivating us to continually participate in the ongoing Socratic dialectic. In the process, we acquire another perspective from which we can critically evaluate our current set of warranted beliefs to come up with a more comprehensive and reliable set of warranted beliefs. In short, interpreting Plato from a philosophical-literary approach allows us to accurately portray the spirit of Plato's texts more than Curran's approach does.

Closing Remarks

Reading Plato's *Phaedrus* 259e-279c via a philosophical-literary interpretative approach enables readers to critically evaluate the philosophical themes discussed in this text in more detail than the standard philosophical interpretative approach. In turn, a philosopher can subject Plato's philosophical hypotheses, as he articulated them in his writings, to more thorough critical examination. Additionally, a philosophical-literary interpretative approach to reading Plato lets scholars analyze how *Phaedrus* is an example of Plato applying his theory of mimetic communication to the art of rhetoric. More importantly, such an interpretation of the *Phaedrus* opens a space for Plato's voice to participate in the dialectical conversations that occurs in contemporary philosophical circles, thus keeping his philosophical project alive as a viable option for us now.

NOTES

[1] All *Phaedrus* quotations come from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997) 507-556.

[2] See *Republic* V, 479e-480, for the similarity between Phaedrus and the *philodoxa*, or a lover of opinions. This similarity reveals itself in Phaedrus' initial, enthusiastic respond to Lysias' meaningless, yet aesthetically pleasing, speech. Phaedrus' status as a misguided *philodoxa* motivates Socrates to "proselytize" him from merely appreciating well-spoken, but hollow, speeches to loving philosophical inquiry. Also read Bruce Gottfried's "Pan, the Cicadas, and Plato's Use of Myth in the *Phaedrus*," *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations*, ed. Gerald A. Press (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993) 179-195, particularly pages 192-193 where Gottfried masterfully links Socrates' second speech on love to Socrates' intention to persuade Phaedrus that philosophic *eros* is more beautiful, and thus more desirable to pursue, than any other *eros*.

[3] To substantiate the statements made in this paragraph, I refer to Socrates' comments in 256c-d, "Well, everything else in [my speeches] really appear to me to have been spoken in play. But part of it was given with Fortune's guidance, and there were in it two kinds of things the nature of which it would be quite wonderful to grasp by means of a systematic art."

[4] I direct this comment to those familiar with Bruce Gottfried's interpretation of the *Phaedrus*. I do not agree with Gottfried's contention: "It appears that the dialectical rearrangement of opinion leads to truth because it serves as an aid to memory, just as in the *Meno* the geometrical diagram which Socrates drew on the ground served as an aid to memory for the young boy (82b-84a)" (194). Perhaps I am mistaken in my disagreement with Gottfried, but I read *Phaedrus* as substantiating the thesis that dialectic leads to truth not merely because it serves as an aid to memory, but also because it captures the listener's attention, lets the listener participate in the inquiry of the subject matter being discussed, and gives both the dialectician and the listener the opportunity to critically examine the merits and demerits of various *doxai*.

[5] See *Phaedrus* 278a-b for Socrates' summation of the role that the dialectical method plays in cultivating

the love of wisdom in those souls who yearn for knowledge, for "what is just, noble, and good [...]" (278a). Also refer to *Symposium* 206e-208b and 209a-209e for some similarities between Socrates' discussion of dialectic *logos* in *Phaedrus* 278a-b and Diotima's discussion with Socrates about how mortals participate in the spiritual birth of eternal truths and how mortals possess immortality insofar as their souls birth such spiritual offspring for future generations to admire and contemplate.

[6] Curran admits as much when she wrote, "[...] Plato uses these tools [from rhetoric] in the structure of his dialogue, thus persuading his readers" (71).

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