
Eros in Plato's *Phaedrus* and the Shape of Greek Rhetoric

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FOR PLATO, RHETORIC was not a morally neutral set of skills in language and speaking, but part and parcel of the entire set of conventional ethical and political values that needed to be uprooted and replaced with better ones. Yet Plato's opposition to rhetoric took many forms. In the *Apology* Plato rejected the conventional rhetoric of the law court, yet the *Apology* is one of the most original and compelling demonstrations of rhetorical art in a judicial setting. In the *Gorgias* he sought to undermine rhetoric's competence in the political domain. In the *Menexenus* he parodied the rhetoric of the civic funeral oration. In the *Symposium* he rejected conventional rhetoric of praise (198b–199b).¹ In the *Statesman* (303e–304e), Plato acknowledges that rhetoric possesses a certain utility with regard to persuasion, and on that basis he grants rhetoric a limited and dependent claim to the status of art (τέχνη). The limit, of course, is set by philosophy: rhetoric is turned into a tool to be used for the advancement of the social and political ends that are determined strictly by philosophy. In this respect, rhetoric becomes precisely parallel to the other tools that are at the disposal of the benevolent, philosophically enlightened ruler, such as mythological tales, civic cult, noble lies, and, when appropriate, the use of force. Finally, in the *Laws*, although the citizens are forbidden to use rhetoric (937d–938c)—in the sense of artful deception—the lawgiver himself, a master rhetorician, composes preambles to the law code as a whole and to individual laws within the law code. These preambles are deliberative speeches, designed, as Plato says, to add per-

suasion to the compulsory force of the law.² Plato's relation to rhetoric is like his relation to poetry: he scorned them both because they interfere with philosophy; yet even though he sought to suppress or control them, he could never ignore them. They were too deeply ingrained in Greek life.

Plato's opposition to rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* takes yet a different and ultimately more interesting form. In the first part of the dialogue, Phaedrus stages in private an epideictic contest between Lysias and Socrates on the theme of eros. As the contest takes an unexpected turn, Socrates produces what is known as his Great Speech. It owes its epithet to its sustained brilliance, expansiveness, imagination, and intensity, and also to the fact that within the dialogue it is presented as both a *tour de force* of rhetorical display and, in a challenge to the genre of rhetorical display, a deadly serious discourse on love and the pursuit of knowledge. In the second part of the dialogue, Socrates leads Phaedrus in a dialectical discussion that aims to describe what a true art of rhetoric would be like. Rejecting the rhetorical theories of contemporary sophists, Socrates proposes instead a vast, new art of discourse that includes dialectic and psychology and pretends to an effectiveness only dreamt of by contemporary rhetoricians.

What kind of art is it that Plato presents in the *Phaedrus*, and why has Plato taken this approach in particular? Recent scholars have tended to label Plato's conception a "philosophical rhetoric" and to conclude that this ideal or philosophical rhetoric is essentially philosophy under a different name.³ Their reasoning goes as follows. Having rejected the view of contemporary rhetoricians that a rhetor needs only opinion (*δόξα*) on the subject of his discourse, Plato requires the expert speaker to know the truth about the subject of his discourse. He specifies the procedures of dialectic, known as collection and division, that will enable his expert speaker to acquire the appropriate knowledge; and he describes what these procedures are and how they work. On this account, the *Phaedrus* takes up where the *Gorgias* left off. In the *Gorgias* Plato demonstrated that if the rhetor does not have

clear, firm knowledge of the subject of his discourse, it will lead to harm for all parties; and that only one who has such knowledge, normally the philosopher, is qualified to speak in a rhetorical situation. By thrusting philosophy into the very heart of rhetoric and remaking it in philosophy's image, the *Phaedrus* completes the job begun in the *Gorgias*.

It is not necessarily wrong to conceive of Plato's project in the *Phaedrus* as a philosophical rhetoric; it depends on how the term is to be understood. But the emphasis on knowledge and dialectic as the key to Plato's rhetoric obscures much of what is really going on in the dialogue. I will argue that in the *Phaedrus* Plato rejects sophistic rhetoric not because it interferes with philosophy (although it does), but because it fails at its own task of composing persuasive speeches. Focusing on what happens in the soul when persuasion takes place, Plato outlines an art of persuasion based on arousing desire in the auditor's soul. And it is the very demonstration of that art in Socrates' Great Speech that supplies the *Phaedrus* with its philosophical punch. Before concluding, I will broach a broader perspective: Plato's experiment with eros and rhetoric has important consequences for understanding the ancient rhetorical tradition in general.



IT IS IMPORTANT to bear in mind that Plato's purpose is not restricted to either rhetoric, in the conventional sense of the term, or philosophy. He defines his inquiry thus:

Must not the art of rhetoric (ἡ ῥητορικὴ τέχνη) taken as a whole, be a kind of soul-moving power of discourse (ψυχαγωγία τις διὰ λόγων), not only in courts of law and other public gatherings, but in private places also? And must it not be the same art that is concerned with great issues and small, its right employment commanding no more respect when dealing with important matters than with unimportant? (*Phdr.* 261a, trans. adapted from Hackforth)

This is a universal art of discourse and applies, as Socrates says, “to all things that are said” (261e)—prose and poetry, public and private, extemporaneous and prepared, spoken and written, rhetorical and dialectical. So while the *Phaedrus*' new art of discourse is certainly not coterminous with the rhetoric of contemporary sophists, it is also not coterminous with philosophy. Plato retains the name “art of rhetoric”—ῥητορικὴ τέχνη—but seeks to understand the “soul-moving” power of discourse—ψυχαγωγία—wherever it appears.⁴

Further, Plato's requirement that his expert rhetor learn dialectic and know the truth about the subject of his discourse, vitally important as this innovation is, does not amount to making the rhetor into a philosopher. In every other dialogue where Plato treats rhetoric—either rejecting it entirely or subordinating it to philosophy—he relies on philosophically acceptable criteria to evaluate what counts as an art (i.e., knowledge, benefit, teachability, precision).⁵ And he establishes that the ends of philosophy, such as pursuing the truth and pursuing one's welfare based on knowledge, are preferable to the ends of rhetoric, which in his view amount to pursuing pleasure or power for its own sake. In the *Phaedrus*, however, Plato refrains from imposing on rhetoric criteria determined by philosophy. Rather, Plato has Socrates pursue the question of rhetoric's status as an art without considering any ends other than those derived from rhetoric itself—namely, what it is that makes discourse persuasive. It is precisely because dialectic is effective for persuasion that it is to be introduced into rhetorical education. Plato's rhetor is required to know the truth, but he is not necessarily expected to speak the truth. When it is rhetorically expedient to obscure the truth, he is expected to do that, and his dialectically acquired knowledge of the truth will enable him to do it effectively (*Phdr.* 261c–262c).

So although the artistically proficient rhetor of the *Phaedrus* is required to learn dialectic, he does so strictly for instrumental reasons while pursuing his primary goal of

enhancing persuasion. As far as the argument conducted in the second half of the *Phaedrus* is concerned, there is nothing to prevent the rhetor from using his superior rhetorical skills, acquired by and buttressed with dialectical knowledge, for purely personal, corrupt, or destructive ends. In fact, Socrates' first speech, in which he follows Lysias by arguing in favor of the non-lover, is an example of dialectical knowledge used rhetorically for a corrupt end.⁶ A rhetor who is not thoroughly convinced of the values of the philosophical life, that is, one who chooses truth not for its own sake but for its rhetorical usefulness, is, for Plato at least, no philosopher.

Yet the *Phaedrus* is no less emphatic in advocating a complete and fundamental revolution in values than are such dialogues as the *Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*. What is distinctive in the *Phaedrus* is the manner in which Plato goes about this task. Plato does not fail to signal that, as one would expect, he has not abandoned his view of the priority of philosophy over all other activities, his new art of discourse included. Near the end of the dialogue (274a), Socrates imagines an exchange with Tisias, the legendary Syracusan who represents rhetoric as traditionally conceived. Claiming that the true rhetor will renounce the gratification of his fellow men and endeavor instead to gratify the gods, Socrates expresses, implicitly but unmistakably, the view that the true rhetor will adopt the ends of the philosopher. For clearly it is the philosopher who seeks to gratify the gods while it is the traditional rhetor who in Plato's view seeks to gratify his fellow men. But in the absence of an argument to establish rhetoric's dependence on philosophy, the burden of making that point falls entirely on the one place in the dialogue where the case is made for philosophy's absolute priority for ordering human affairs, and that is Socrates' Great Speech on eros.⁷

Clearly, Plato's commitment to the priority of philosophy is such that he would not have structured the *Phaedrus* in this way without a strategic purpose. From a rhetorical point of view, Plato has set himself an interesting task.

Rhetoric, as it were, takes on the task of arguing the priority of philosophy. What is wanted is rhetorical persuasion, not philosophical dialectic. And for the entire conceit to work, the speech must actually be compelling. Before I consider Socrates' Great Speech and the way in which it presents a rhetorical alternative to sophistic rhetoric, let me briefly recall the context that gave Plato cause to write a dialogue structured in this manner.



IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to fix the date of any Platonic dialogue exactly, but no one is likely to put the *Phaedrus* earlier than 380 or later than 360 BC.⁸ For the purpose of understanding the context in which the *Phaedrus* was composed, any time within that period will do. At that time, the Athenians had, astonishingly, largely recovered from the devastating events at the end of the fifth century—the defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the bloody civil war that immediately followed. The Athenians had rebuilt their fortifications, their navy, and much of their overseas empire. Passions stirred by the civil war, at first contained by an amnesty, had cooled. The democracy had been reorganized, the law code revised. For the first time ever, the city's political and legal institutions achieved a degree of legitimacy that made democracy secure and violent faction unlikely.

This atmosphere fostered a dramatic change in the status of rhetoric from what it had been just a generation earlier. The so-called “great sophists” who introduced rhetoric to Athens in the late fifth century—Gorgias, Protagoras, Thrasymachus, and others—were itinerant and non-Athenian. They found an audience among the elite who wanted, and could pay for, instruction in political and forensic skills. But these sophists were frequently the object of popular suspicion. And their written texts (as opposed to their public performances) were mostly technical, devoted to arcane topics of no popular appeal, and publicly spurned by anyone

seeking political influence.⁹ Yet one generation into the fourth century, rhetoric was thriving because it was becoming institutionalized. By the 370s, one can speak, for the first time, of an Athenian rhetorical establishment that offered formal schooling to an advanced level and exploited the still-new medium of literary prose to an extent previously unrealized. (Of course, Plato too embraced the new possibilities of literary prose and he too became the head of a school of higher learning.) Popular Athenian mistrust of rhetoric did not vanish overnight, but the integration of formal rhetoric into everyday politics and civic life had begun. By the 370s, rhetorical preparation and rhetorical texts began to be used openly by politicians and litigants. Connections between the democratic institutions and the rhetorical establishment were rapidly expanding.¹⁰

No reader of the *Phaedrus* fails to notice its high-spirited polemical tone. In Socrates' contest with Lysias, Plato fashions for Lysias a pitifully inept speech that mocks the master speechwriter's pretension to rhetorical skill. Isocrates, Plato's chief rival as author and educator and the clearest symbol of the newly successful rhetorical establishment, does not escape Plato's wit. Allusions to Isocrates' *Busiris*, a work that was intended as a model of encomiastic discourse, show it to be woefully inadequate in contrast with Socrates' Great Speech. And Plato mocks Isocrates with ironical praise at the end of the dialogue (278e–279a), the only place in the Platonic corpus where Isocrates is named.¹¹ The founding generation of the rhetorical establishment does not fail to receive its share of polemical attention. In a page and a half that offers more evidence on early rhetorical theory than any other surviving source (266c–267e), Socrates contemptuously dismisses works on this or that aspect of rhetorical theory by Theodorus, Evenus, Tisias, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, Polus, Lycymnius, Protagoras, and Thrasymachus; by the 370s these were the inherited classics of the genre. Pericles, Athens' great fifth-century leader and the master of political rhetoric, is given patently ironic praise for his supposed mastery of ar-

cane rhetorical theory and natural science (269e–270b). Yet there is no basis to specify this or that figure, or others whom one might name (Alcidamas, Theodectes), as Plato's particular target; it is rather the whole establishment that he has in view. The dialogue's polemical tone is subsumed into a larger purpose, one made urgent by the rapidity with which rhetoric was then becoming institutionally rooted in Athenian society.

Plato's purpose is to confront the entire rhetorical establishment on its own terms, and he does so in two senses. First, while bracketing rhetoric's political and ethical consequences—issues that concern him elsewhere—Plato puts at the center of his inquiry the very question that lies at the heart of the rhetoricians' own enterprise, namely, how discourse persuades and how an understanding of persuasion can be implemented by art. Second, addressing the rhetoricians by their chosen means (rhetoric) rather than by his (dialectic), he composes a speech that demonstrates the efficacy of his rhetorical art. For although the dialectical account of the new art of rhetoric carried out in the second half of the *Phaedrus* might satisfy a philosopher, it would be unlikely to convince a rhetorician. It is, after all, the means of persuasion that (among other things) distinguishes philosophers and rhetoricians and that Plato's inquiry has put in question. Further, as Plato himself argues (268a–269c), an account of rhetoric that fails to demonstrate its potency in action would be a paltry thing of no interest. He compares an account of medicine that fails to demonstrate efficacy in healing, an account of tragic poetry that fails to demonstrate the ability to compose a tragedy, and an account of music that fails to demonstrate the ability to create music.

The subject of the speech that bears this burden in the dialogue had to be chosen with care. A speech on any old topic would demonstrate nothing, for persuasive skill is really tested only in cases that matter and where people truly differ (263b). So the speech concerns a topic that is both important to Plato and the rhetoricians and divides them: the absolute

priority of philosophy and the superiority of the philosophical life over any other. By structuring his dialogue so that this point, for Plato the most important one, rests solely on the speech in question and not on a dialectical argument, Plato demonstrates his commitment to the enterprise. Compare the *Gorgias*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Republic*, for instance, where Plato makes his main point twice, using dialectic and a mythological speech. In the *Phaedrus* Plato makes his case for adopting philosophical values only once and he does so in a speech that avoids formal reasoning. To say that Plato aims to beat the rhetoricians at their own game would accord with the polemical undertone of the dialogue. In truth, Plato has adopted a strategy that suits the nature of the material and the audience being addressed.



IF, AS I HAVE CLAIMED, the purpose of Socrates' Great Speech is to make the case that the pursuit of wisdom should be the driving priority in one's life, how does the speech make that case compelling? Wherein, to use Plato's phrase, lies the "soul-moving" power of this discourse?

The Great Speech differs from the earlier formal speeches of the dialogue in two fundamental respects.¹² First and most obviously, the advice offered in the Great Speech is precisely the opposite of that offered in both Lysias' speech and Socrates' first speech. This is the sense in which the Great Speech is Socrates' "palinode," as he calls it, imitating Stesichorus' recantation of his poem that blamed Helen for the Trojan War (242c–243d). Both of the earlier speeches advise the young man to bestow his favors not on an older man who loves him, but on one who does not. In the Great Speech, however, Socrates advises the young man to attach himself to an older man who does love him. It turns out, of course, that the divine eros of the Great Speech directs both partners away from the conventional values and goals of Athenian society and towards philosophy. Here dialectic's

contribution to rhetoric is crucial. As Socrates points out later in the dialogue (265a–266b), it was precisely the dialectical procedure of collection and division that enabled him to recognize and understand the divine eros which is the subject of the Great Speech. Had Socrates not known any better, that is, had he not been prepared through his dialectical understanding of the good and bad forms of love, he would never have been in a position to retract his first speech and deliver the Great Speech as a palinode.

But the Great Speech does not just have better, truer advice for its recipient; it also delivers the advice in a more compelling manner. This, the second difference between the Great Speech and the earlier speeches, concerns the means of persuasion: how the speech argues what it argues. A concern with the means of persuasion is built into the very situation in which each of the speeches is delivered. Phaedrus wants Socrates to hear Lysias' speech in the first place not because of its wisdom, but because of its cleverness, its impressiveness as a piece of rhetoric. But Lysias' speech is so bad, that is, so poor a demonstration of rhetorical skill (235a), that Socrates immediately senses he can do better. Roused by the bucolic setting and encouraged by Phaedrus' entreaties,¹³ Socrates delivers a speech that argues the same clever paradoxical case, only in more compelling fashion. Socrates has clearly won the informal epideictic contest with Lysias when he suddenly realizes that he must recant in order to repair his standing with the god Eros. The contest orchestrated by Phaedrus is overtaken, the situation slips out of his control, and Socrates' priorities take over. What is wanted now is not a display of rhetorical skill for the connoisseur's entertainment, but a speech that actually makes the case for divine eros and that would actually persuade a young man to choose the right kind of older partner. This is what gives Socrates' Great Speech its first erotic charge—it matters whether or not it persuades. It matters for Socrates' welfare vis-à-vis the god Eros, for the soul of the imagined young man being addressed, and, above all, for Plato's project in the dialogue as a whole.¹⁴

Both Lysias' speech and Socrates' first speech assume an adversarial situation and argue from expediency. The young man being addressed is asked to consider how his choice of lover will affect his self-interest, and as a rational actor he is expected to calculate his self-interest and maximize it. Lysias' speech makes its case in a haphazard manner, Socrates' first speech makes the same case in an organized, focused, analytically deft manner.¹⁵ Yet in both speeches the young man is suspended, as it were, between two alternatives, deliberating and awaiting sufficient reason to choose X rather than Y. The adversarial situation and the reasoning based on expediency are entirely conventional: remove the trappings of the imagined circumstances and they could be replicated in an assembly deciding between politicians or a court deciding between litigants. The Great Speech, on the other hand, far from seeking to win a contest of deliberation, does not contemplate deliberation at all. It does not consider expediency and does not present formal reasons leading to the conclusion that divine eros is the better choice. It reduces adversarial rhetoric to a minimum, just a few words framing the speech at the beginning and end. Socrates speaks as if there were no opponent arguing another side and focuses the attention of the imagined young man exclusively on the subject matter of the speech. Rather than giving the auditor sufficient, better, or even overwhelming reason to seek divine eros, Socrates aims to make the auditor feel the attractions of divine eros so intensely that he will desire that eros himself and move towards it on his own.

The bulk of the Great Speech consists of a narrative that describes the harrowing, arduous journey of the soul towards its proper goal, the overcoming of mortality through the knowledge of being. The soul is likened to the "combined force of a team of winged horses and their winged charioteer" (246a). Striving to reach the rim of heaven and in the company of the gods to gaze directly upon being, the most beautiful sight there is, the charioteer struggles to control his team of one obedient horse and one recalcitrant one.

The travails of the journey are intense, as is the joy upon success. The narrative moves back to earth and to the struggle to establish an erotic-philosophical relationship that will lead to a life in pursuit of wisdom and ultimately to the immortality achieved through knowledge of being. Throughout the narrative both the charioteer in pursuit of being and the lover in pursuit of a beautiful beloved are driven by the divine eros that alone can bring them to their goals.

According to Plato, mimetic art, both visual and poetic, has the ability to arouse the desires and appetites of those who are spectators of that art.¹⁶ Plato exploits this aspect of mimetic art to advance his purpose in the *Phaedrus*. The Great Speech, a mimesis in prose, portrays the pursuit of knowledge as an intense erotic experience, triggered and driven by the sight of beauty—the sight of being itself and the parallel sight of the beauty of the beloved (251a–252b). The portrayal is so vivid and the narrative tension so intense that the auditor himself acquires a desire for the very experience that is portrayed. Eros, vividly portrayed, arouses eros. This psychagogic, or soul-moving, phenomenon, which is the hallmark of erotic art, was familiar to Plato and his contemporaries through the profusion of erotic art produced in Athens and Greece generally. Beyond the erotic images of Attic vases, perhaps most compelling were the erotic poems of Sappho, Anacreon, and Ibycus, all of whom Socrates mentions in the *Phaedrus* (235c, 242c).¹⁷ In both the Great Speech and the erotic poets, vivid description rivets attention on the erotic experience to the exclusion of all else. The words, however artfully chosen and arranged, pass unnoticed as the erotic experience is made present. The eros that is portrayed comes suddenly and unawares. It is urgent, irresistible, unpredictable, divine, and intrusive. It is felt as a kind of movement that provokes movement in response. Deliberative thought is elided. In the moment when such intense eros is fixed on its goal, all thought of the conventional goods that belong to everyday life is obliterated. Eros knows only the object it desires.¹⁸

Of course, the Great Speech also differs from archaic erotic poetry. In the archaic poets, the erotic experience that is depicted is immediately recognizable despite its many variations. The narrative is exceedingly brief and focuses on an essential, perhaps emblematic, moment. The intensity of the experience, which cannot be faked, assures its veracity. The eros is sexual and arouses in the poem's auditor an eros of the same kind. On the other hand, the narrative of the Great Speech is long, detailed, and complex. The eros that is depicted is unfamiliar. Though it is sexual in the manner in which it is initially stimulated, the eros of the Great Speech changes as it grows, transforming itself into a higher kind of eros that seeks fulfillment in a higher, nobler, and more exciting activity than sex.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in a manner that Plato insists on but never specifies, the transcendent eros that seeks knowledge of being always retains its innate affinity with sexual eros.²⁰ Though it is only philosophers whose eros perseveres through its corporeal manifestations to attain fulfillment in philosophy and knowledge, even the eros of those individuals who remain at a lower, corporeal level naturally points upward towards transcendence. That is, for all of us human beings, no matter our place in the hierarchy of souls that extends from the tyrant at the bottom to the seeker of wisdom and beauty at the top (248d–e), eros is a continuum. It begins with sex but its natural goal, as well as its ultimate source, is communion with being. How does Socrates establish the immediacy and unconditional veracity that is needed to create emotional impact for this novel, transcendent erotic experience?

Here it is necessary to notice an important, but paradoxical feature of Plato's argument. At the beginning of the Great Speech, Socrates portrays the eros that spurs the soul towards philosophy as a form of divine *mania*, or madness. Like prophecy, ritual healing, and poetry, this eros comes as a blessing from the gods (244a–245c); apparently it is beyond human control and irreducible to art (τέχνη). Yet later in the dialogue Socrates discusses poetry and healing—the latter now in its scientific form of medicine (ιατρική)—as arts

that are exemplary for rhetorical art in their comprehensive-ness and systematic method (268a–269c). Likewise, when Socrates outlines the nature of rhetorical art, it becomes evident that his purpose is to harness eros for rhetorical ends, to subdue it, as it were, into the confines of the new art of discourse. (The scale of this endeavor will be clear in a moment.) Thus Plato treats poetry, healing, and eros as arising from both beneficent divine madness and art; he makes no attempt to defuse the tension inherent in this unmediated juxtaposition between art and divine madness. For Plato there was no contradiction, as there might be for us, in first extolling eros' divine, supra-human status and then describing the means of controlling eros for educational purposes.

In the dialectical discussion that follows the Great Speech, Socrates explains the power of his eloquence by introducing the doctrine of rhetorical psychology. Psychology is, after dialectic, the second of the two crucial innovations to traditional rhetoric introduced in the *Phaedrus*, and it is much the more radical of the two. As soon as Plato defined rhetoric as the “soul-moving” power of discourse (ψυχαγωγία), he prefigured rhetoric's need for psychology. Socrates envisages a vast elaborate network of souls, persuasive tasks, and speeches, arrayed systematically to enable the trained rhetor to reliably convince anyone of anything by responding to the natural qualities of the auditor's soul. The following passage describes just part of the psychological training required of the expert rhetor:

[The expert rhetor] will classify the types of discourse and the types of soul, and the various ways in which souls are affected, explaining the reasons in each case, suggesting the type of speech appropriate to each type of soul, and showing what kind of speech necessarily (ἐξ ἀνάγκης) creates belief in one soul and disbelief in another, and why . . . Since the function of discourse is in fact to move men's souls (ψυχαγωγία), the intending orator must know what types of soul there are. Now these are of a determinate number, and their variety results in a variety of individuals. To the types

of soul thus discriminated there corresponds a determinate number of types of discourse. Hence a certain type of hearer will be easy to persuade by a certain type of speech to take such and such action for such and such reason, while another type will be hard to persuade. (271b–d, trans. adapted from Hackforth)

The passage continues at some length, describing the manner in which the rhetor learns in practice to distinguish particular types of soul and to apply the appropriate form of discourse in order to trigger in each type of soul the desired response (271d–272b). On this account, persuasion is not just a matter of words, phrases, forms of argument, and all the other linguistic phenomena that are catalogued in the sophists' rejected rhetoric books (266c–267e), but the creation of desire in the auditor's soul. The art of discourse based on this psychology is designed to exploit the soul's natural capacities for desire and transcendence.²¹ It persuades by recognizing, and controlling, the naturally existing desire that is specific to any persuasive goal and any particular auditor. When mastered, the entire scheme of using discourse to manipulate desire is claimed to be necessarily effective (ἐξ ἀνάγκης) in producing persuasion (271b). This guarantee of effectiveness, to which I will return, allows Plato to claim for his project the status of art that he denies to the feeble and fallible rhetorical project of sophistic contemporaries. So far as I am aware, in the ancient world there is only one instance that even approaches Plato's claim of reliably effective persuasion. In the *Helen* (8–19), Gorgias depicts persuasion (πείθω) as an overwhelming, irresistible force, withering the auditor's autonomy, and parallel to eros in its consequences and manner of operation. Yet as important as the *Helen* is, it offers little more than a gesture towards the erotic power of persuasion. Gorgias considers neither the principles nor the practice of erotic discourse and he does not demonstrate it in action.²²

As I have said, the goal of the Great Speech is to advocate philosophy and its values over the conventional values of

Athenian society, particularly as these were supported by the growing rhetorical establishment, and to do so with a decisiveness that Plato otherwise reserves for dialectic. I have already demonstrated that Plato avoids a head-to-head debate between philosophy and traditional rhetoric. Such an encounter would concede to traditional rhetoric its natural terrain and could win for philosophy at best the modest level of conviction commonly reached in the negotiations of everyday politics and law. Rather, the absolute priority of philosophy requires, so to speak, an absolute rhetoric. So in the Great Speech Plato abandons plausibility (*τὸ εἰκόδες*), the norm of traditional rhetoric (272d–274a), and puts to use the auditor's capacity to imagine transcendence and human perfection. The narrative of the Great Speech palpably connects the auditor's situation in Athens to the immortality of his soul. One could say that in the Great Speech Plato refers to philosophy and the pursuit of wisdom, but he addresses the highest, innate aspirations that can be ascribed to the auditor. It is entirely possible that previously the imagined young man had no idea that he had such aspirations, that he even could have them. But, like the soul's wings that by nature sprout and fly upwards, according to Plato's psychology such aspirations are innate in the young man. They are awakened by the very promise of their fulfillment in the concrete vision of transcendence and triumph that Socrates dangles before him. To mark the combination of transcendent desire and ecstatic fulfillment, Socrates borrows metaphors from the ecstatic moment of epiphany in orgiastic mystery cult and concentrates them at the moment when the charioteer attains the vision of true being:

Then were we all initiated into that mystery which is rightly accounted blessed beyond all others; whole and unblemished were we that did celebrate it, untouched by the evils that awaited us in days to come; whole and unblemished likewise, free from all alloy, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation; pure was the light that shone around us, and pure were we. (250b–c, trans. Hackforth)²³

This is one of Plato's sublime passages. "The evils that awaited us in days to come" refers to earthly existence; fastening onto earthly striving and its palpable limitations, Plato looks beyond to divine freedom and purity.

Nevertheless, the strategy and sublime artistry of the Great Speech would fall flat if the auditor were not to believe implicitly in the speaker's utter candor. In rhetoric, there is no warrant for candor; the speaker must always secure the auditor's trust. With regard to the Great Speech, it is less Phaedrus' enthusiasm in listening to the speech that impresses than Socrates' in delivering it. From Socrates' perspective the Great Speech cannot be delivered as just a pleasant, edifying story. For the sake of Socrates' reparation towards the god Eros, for the sake of the imagined young man being addressed, and for the sake of Plato's project in the dialogue as a whole, Socrates must simply be committed to what he says in the Great Speech. On this point there can be no irony between him and the auditor.²⁴ The audacity required to conceive and to deliver the Great Speech is impressive in the way that Lysias' poor speech was meant to be. That audacity corresponds to the unprecedented daring and scope of Plato's psychology as well as his ethics and metaphysics. And it reveals Plato's ability to conceive of rhetorical resources that far surpass anything imagined by his more mundane rhetorical contemporaries.



AS RHETORIC CARVED OUT for itself an autonomous realm in fourth-century Athens and then developed into a full-fledged discipline, it uniformly rejected dialectic and knowledge; they were found to be both impractical and unnecessary for persuasion in the civic arena. Eros and transcendence, however, posed a more complicated problem. First, consider two examples that illustrate how transcendent desire can be manipulated in practical rhetorical situations. I distinguish here between transcendent desire, which would move human ex-

istence to a higher plane, and the numerous mundane desires that are regularly aroused and manipulated by politicians and other speakers in the course of normal life.

In the first example, Thucydides speaks of the eros of the citizen body in the funeral oration. The funeral oration fits the scenario for transcendent rhetoric. It is not adversarial, does not appeal to the deliberative faculty, and does not argue on the basis of expediency. Pericles vividly portrays both an ideal Athens and the everlasting glory that is achieved by dying for Athens. Intending to awaken in the citizens a passionate desire to sacrifice themselves for the city and thereby win the glory that is deemed greater even than that bestowed by Homer, Pericles urges them to “look daily upon the city’s real power and become lovers (*ἐρασταί*) of the city” (2.43.1). Pericles offers a vivid, concrete route to a beautiful, civic immortality.²⁵

Second, in the speech *On the Crown*, Demosthenes engages in sharp adversarial rhetoric with his opponent, Aeschines. He does not speak of eros. But in the central, most famous passage of the speech—the oath sworn by the Athenian forefathers who fought at Marathon—Demosthenes awakens a transcendent desire among his audience and turns it to his purpose:

But you were not wrong, no, you were not, Athenians, to take on danger for the sake of the freedom and safety of all—I swear by your forefathers who led the fight at Marathon, by those who stood in the ranks at Plataea, by those who fought aboard ship at Salamis and Artemisium, and by the many other brave men who lie in the public tombs, all of whom the city buried, deeming them all equally worthy of the same honor, Aeschines, not just those among them who were successful or victorious. Rightly so, for they all performed the task required of brave men and they each met with the fortune conferred on them by god. (18.208)

Demosthenes vividly describes the choice faced by every Athenian citizen whether or not to risk his life in defense of

Greek freedom; he dwells on the ancestors who chose to resist the barbarian invaders. The oath, which deifies the ancestors and thereby demonstrates the immortal glory that is at stake, awakens in the audience the desire to seek their own immortal glory alongside that of their illustrious forebears. They can secure that glory now by endorsing their decision to risk all in defense of Greek freedom fighting the barbarian Philip at Chaeronea. Like Pericles in the funeral oration, Demosthenes portrays the choice at hand, which just happens to support his cause, as the concrete route to a beautiful, civic immortality.

What is common between these examples and Socrates' Great Speech in the *Phaedrus* is the attempt to give the auditor a vivid sense of transcending his concrete, lived situation in Athens to reach immortality. In spite of the evident power of these examples, such instances are exceptional before the rise of Christianity and the flowering of the rhetoric of Christian salvation. Greek rhetoric never integrated eros into its formal teachings, and I do not believe that it could have done so. Aristotle set the parameters for the discipline when he stated that rhetorical persuasion (πίστις) can be based on three kinds of material only (*Rh.* 1.2): argument (λόγος or πρᾶγμα), the speaker's character (ἦθος), and the auditor's emotions (πάθη). The third of these sources of persuasion, manipulating the auditor's emotions, has sometimes been seen as Aristotle's attempt to incorporate Plato's rhetorical psychology into his own rhetorical art.²⁶ But that view overlooks crucial differences. Aristotle does not include eros among the emotions; he concedes that emotional persuasion is extraneous to whatever question is before the auditor (*Rh.* 1354a11–21); and he does not tie persuasion to transcendent desire. Plato, on the other hand, bases his psychology not on the emotions, but on eros; and he considers the eros awakened by rhetoric as entirely pertinent to whatever question is before the auditor.²⁷

Further, Plato makes persuasion itself—or at least the “soul-moving” power of discourse (ψυχαγωγία)—the aim of his art of discourse, and he sought to make his expert rhetor

capable of reliably persuading anyone of anything; that is the point of his comprehensive rhetorical psychology. But under Aristotle's influence, the price, so to speak, of making practice systematic, of forging an art, is to subject to the speaker's control only that which can be made subject to his control. For Aristotle, whether or not an audience or reader is actually persuaded is ultimately a contingent matter and beyond the reach of art.²⁸ Aristotle defines the task of rhetorical art not as persuasion *per se*, but as the discovery of the available means of persuasion in any given situation (*Rh.* 1.2.1). Aristotle models rhetoric on the adversarial rhetorical situation that Plato rejects in the *Phaedrus*. Moreover, for Aristotle the rhetorical audience is in a position to choose or favor one advocate over another, which makes them, as Aristotle puts it, a judge or critic (κριτής, *Rh.* 1.3.2). Rhetoric's task is simply to provide persuasive material, all phrased, formulated, and organized, of course, with a view to having the most effective impact. But no matter how much the speaker may attempt to produce overwhelming proof and thereby to determine the audience's response, the autonomy of the audience is necessarily respected. Clearly, Plato does not respect the autonomy of the rhetorical or political audience and does not recognize the rhetorical auditor as a legitimate judge. Disciplinary rhetoric had its natural field of endeavor in the world of politics and law, where the adversarial situation was the norm, the audience's autonomy had to be acknowledged, and the questions at stake were practical ones best decided by mundane criteria of expediency and fairness. This remained true until the rise of Christianity—and the need to convert souls—gave rhetoric a new field of operation.²⁹

In spite of the story of divine madness at the opening of the Great Speech, in the second half of the *Phaedrus* Plato suggests that eros can be classified and domesticated within the bounds of art. But the vast systematic psychology of desire and discourse that he proposes has so far proved unachievable and seems likely to remain so. In the comprehensiveness

of this project, we can recognize Plato's aspirations for totalitarian philosophical control of society. Perhaps Plato was simply overreaching. But another explanation is possible. Plato's claim that rhetoric can be made reliably effective (271b) may be understood, like so much else in the *Phaedrus*, as an irony and a taunt at the rhetoricians' failure to understand the demands of their own art.³⁰ In favor of this interpretation is the fact that, notwithstanding the brilliance of the Great Speech, it clearly cannot ensure that anyone who reads the dialogue will find the speech as compelling as does Phaedrus (257b–c). One feature of the criticism of written texts at the end of the *Phaedrus* applies to rhetorical speeches too, as Socrates remarks explicitly (274b–278b, esp. 277e). As a self-contained discourse, a formal speech does not answer questions and thus cannot stand on its own before an individual, inquiring mind.³¹ Just like written text, a rhetorical speech would require in addition the give-and-take of dialectic to put the process of communicating knowledge on a secure basis. Nevertheless, Socrates insists at length and without irony that if rhetoric wants to be taken seriously as an art, then he has outlined the true scale of the endeavor (271c, 272b–274a).

Yet if eros cannot be entirely domesticated within the bounds of art, it is nonetheless very much still in play. Recall Socrates' claim to be an erotic expert (ἔρωτικός), which refers to his ability to affect men like Alcibiades, Charmides, and perhaps Phaedrus with his passion for inquiry and philosophy.³² The "expertise" in question—ἔρωτικὴ τέχνη (*Phdr.* 257a)—is an ironic stab at the pretense of art that was the mark of ambitious, cultivated society. But even though Socrates' influence on young men was not a matter of art in the strict sense of the term, it was no less a matter of design and no less real. Likewise, the Great Speech can be seen as a formal, rhetorical expression of Socrates' erotic force. It is exceptional and represents the intrusion of genius into a realm that was otherwise shaped by the practical and the mundane.

NOTES

For critical comments I am grateful to Steven Crowell, Jefferds Huyck, Charles Kahn, Marie-Pierre Noël, and Stephen Scully, and to audience members at Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, The University of Texas at Austin, and Georgetown University.

1. Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* is more a dialectical argument than an epideictic encomium. On Plato's critique of rhetoric in the *Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Menexenus*, see H. Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca 1996), 117–71.

2. On the preambles of the *Laws*, see Yunis (note 1), 211–36.

3. E.g., C. J. Rowe, "The Argument and Structure of Plato's *Phaedrus*," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 32 (1986), 106–25; M. M. McCabe, "Arguments in Context: Aristotle's Defense of Rhetoric," *Aristotle's Rhetoric: Philosophical Essays*, D. J. Furley and A. Nehamas, eds. (Princeton 1994), 129–65 at 130–34; A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, trans., *Plato: Phaedrus* (Indianapolis 1995), xxix–xlvi.

4. The interest in the soul as the location of rhetoric's operation goes back to the *Gorgias*, where rhetoric "makes persuasion in the soul" (*Grg.* 453a). In the *Phaedrus* Socrates rejects rhetoric's conventional association just with political and legal settings (261a–b), insisting, as it were, on the meaning "speech" or "discourse" that lies at the root of the word rhetoric (ῥητορικὴ). On the universal scope of the *Phaedrus*' art of discourse, see *Phdr.* 277d, 278c, and Yunis (note 1), 173–81.

5. On these criteria of art (τέχνη) and their use by Plato, see M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge 1986), 94–99.

6. At *Phdr.* 265c–266b, Socrates assigns dialectical knowledge of eros to both his speeches. In the *Phaedrus* there is no mention of Socratic intellectualism, the position (taken by Socrates in some of the earlier Platonic dialogues) that knowledge entails virtue, that knowing what is right necessarily leads to doing what is right. The complex soul presented in the *Phaedrus* (as in the *Republic*) allows for the conflict between knowing right and doing right that Socratic intellectualism cannot account for.

7. G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1987), 54–55, argues that Plato has designed the plot and setting of the dialogue precisely to preclude a philosophical argument that would establish philosophy's priority.

8. Friedrich Schleiermacher considered the *Phaedrus* to be Plato's first work, a view that no one accepts anymore (*Einleitung* to Schleiermacher's Plato translation [Berlin 1804–1828]; reprinted in F. Schleiermacher, *Über die Philosophie Platons*, P. M. Steiner, ed. [Hamburg 1996], 25–69). On the date of the *Phaedrus*, see Rowe (note 3), 120–21; on the chronology of Plato's dialogues generally, see C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge 1996), 42–48.

9. On the relation between the texts and performances of the sophists,

see R. Thomas, "Prose Performance Texts: *Epideixis* and Written Publication in the Late Fifth and Early Fourth Centuries," *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, H. Yunis, ed. (Cambridge 2003), 189–212. Aristophanes' *Clouds* perhaps best indicates the popular suspicion aroused by sophists in Athens; see also R. W. Wallace, "The Sophists in Athens" in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, D. Boedeker and K. A. Raafaub, eds. (Cambridge, MA 1998), 203–22, esp. 218–22.

10. This is attested above all by the corpus of Attic oratory, all of which stems from skilled rhetoricians; on the corpus see S. Usher, *Greek Oratory: Tradition and Originality* (Oxford 1999).

11. On Plato's ironic praise of Isocrates, see J. A. Coulter, "Phaedrus 279a: The Praise of Isocrates," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 8 (1967), 225–36. By the 370s Isocrates had opened a school of public speaking, prose writing, and political affairs that attracted outstanding individuals from Athens and all over Greece; in addition to literary speeches in several genres, he had published the *Panegyricus*, the first self-consciously rhetorical text that was directed to the public at large and composed on a massive scale that gestured towards the magnitude of epic poetry and history; see C. Eucken, *Isokrates: Seine Positionen in der Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen* (Berlin 1983). On the allusions in the *Phaedrus* to Isocrates' *Busiris*, see N. Livingstone, *A Commentary on Isocrates' Busiris*, *Mnemosyne Suppl.* 223 (Leiden 2001), 56–66.

12. Lysias' speech (230e–234b); Socrates' first speech (237a–241d); the Great Speech (244a–257b).

13. Ferrari (note 7), 4–9, aptly labels Phaedrus an "intellectual impresario"; see *Phdr.* 242ab. He appears in a similar role in the *Symposium* and the *Protagoras*. Emphasizing the atmosphere of epideictic competition, Phaedrus (jokingly) promises to erect a statue of Socrates in Olympia if his speech is better (236b).

14. Nussbaum (note 5), 200–33, and E. Asmis, "Psychagogia in Plato's *Phaedrus*," *Illinois Classical Studies* 11 (1986), 153–72, argue (in different ways) that the Great Speech is addressed to Phaedrus, who in the role of the beloved (ἐρώμενος) is won over by Socrates, playing the role of the lover (ἐρῶστής). Phaedrus is indeed affected by the speech and shifts his allegiance from Lysias to Socrates. But Phaedrus is not a young man on the verge of entering adult society, and so does not exemplify the kind of young man portrayed in the speeches; see P. W. Gooch, "Has Plato Changed Socrates' Heart in the *Phaedrus*?" *Understanding the Phaedrus: Proceedings of the II Symposium Platonicum*, L. Rossetti, ed. (Sankt Augustin 1992), 309–12. Phaedrus is already an experienced adult and already moves comfortably in adult Athenian society. Far from being a potential beloved (243e is ironic), he is teased as a potential lover (236b, 257b, 279b) and belongs to what I have termed Athens' rhetorical establishment. His presence in the *Phaedrus* (and in the *Symposium*) and his reception of Socrates' speech give substance to Plato's intention to confront the rhetorical establishment on its own terms.

15. T. Calvo, "Socrates' First Speech in the *Phaedrus* and Plato's Criticism of Rhetoric," *Understanding the Phaedrus: Proceedings of the II Symposium Platonicum*, ed. L. Rossetti (note 14), 47–60, argues that Socrates' first speech differs from Lysias' speech in Socrates' insistence that expediency entails not yielding to pleasure.

16. *Republic* 603b–606d. On Plato's theory of mimetic art, see M. Burnyeat, "Culture and Society in Plato's *Republic*," *The Tanner Lectures in Human Values* 20 (1999), 215–324.

17. On these passages, see W. W. Fortenbaugh, "Plato, *Phaedrus* 235c3," *Classical Philology* 61 (1966), 108–9. On Greek erotic art, see J. Boardman and E. La Rocca, *Eros in Greece* (London 1978). On the erotic art of Attic vases, see M. F. Kilmer, *Greek Erotica on Attic Red-Figure Vases* (London 1993).

18. On the representations of erotic experience in the erotic poets and Greek literature generally, see C. Calame, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, J. Lloyd, trans. (Princeton 1999). A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton 1986), 86–122, describes the manner in which Greek erotic poetry and fiction (e.g., *Daphnis and Chloe*, prologue) aims to arouse eros in the reader.

19. Thus the Great Speech views the innate desire for transcendence as a stronger psychological force than our innate instincts and appetites. This pits Plato against Freud.

20. The philosophical lovers of the Great Speech still experience sexual eros in full force. The best such lovers refrain from sex, while lovers of a slightly lesser order occasionally give in (255e–256d).

21. In 271b–272b, Socrates does not explicitly mention eros as that which moves the soul; he merely speaks about the soul being moved (*ψυχαγωγία*). It is necessary to understand from the Great Speech that it is eros that moves the soul. The typology of souls laid out in 271b–272b corresponds to the hierarchy of souls described in the Great Speech (248c–e). The levels of that hierarchy are differentiated according to the extent of their original vision of true being, and that determines the nature and degree of the eros that moves them.

22. What Gorgias describes in the *Helen* is not the art of discourse, but the power of discourse; see T. Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1991), 146–53.

23. Similar imagery, though less intense, at *Phdr.* 249c, 250e–251a. *Smp.* 210e–212a presents eros as the route to immortality and the consummation of eros as the ecstatic attainment of knowledge of true beauty.

24. Further, the ironic stance of Socrates' first speech, indicated by Socrates' covering his head in shame and adopting the persona of a lover who poses as a non-lover (237a–b), creates a contrast that removes the threat of irony in the palinodic Great Speech.

25. Speaking of the conclusion to the debate on invading Sicily, Thucydides reports that "eros to undertake the expedition fell upon them all" (6.24.3). This eros was not aroused by rhetoric; it was preexisting and inadvertently intensified by Nicias.

26. For example, G. A. Kennedy, trans., *Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (Oxford 1991), 163–64; A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton 2002), 261. For Aristotle's account of persuasion based on the auditor's emotions, see *Rh.* 2.2–11.

27. For Plato, since every instance of discourse is necessarily an opportunity for moral improvement or corruption, every discourse has the opportunity to excite the appropriate desire that will lead to improvement. Further, whereas disciplinary rhetoric learned to manipulate the emotions of mass audiences, Plato's rhetorical psychology seeks to tailor persuasion to the individual. This is one sense, at least, in which the rhetoric of the *Phaedrus* deserves the name "philosophical rhetoric."

28. E. Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Chicago 1994), 18–51.

29. See G. A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill 1980), 55, 120–60.

30. Similar ironic taunts: Pericles as master rhetorician (269a–270a); Lysias as effective speechwriter (257c–258d); earlier authors of rhetorical manuals (Protagoras, Thrasymachus, et al.) as knowledgeable in rhetorical psychology (271c).

31. Socrates levels this criticism at Protagoras' formal speech in the *Protagoras* (329a–b).

32. See *Smp.* 215a–22b for Alcibiades' eulogy of Socrates, describing his erotic power. For Socrates as erotic expert, see *Phdr.* 227c, 257a; *Smp.* 177de; *Lysis* 204bc; *Meno* 80a; *Theages* 130a. *Smp.* 198d, denying erotic expertise, is ironic.