

And Now, a Word – Asking Too Much

Erik Doxtader

It is difficult to say what might be said. It is a difficult moment to speak of the word's potential. Today, it is difficult not to wonder whether potential “goes” without saying, whether it withers without care for the word.¹ What now? Now what? Are we merely enduring the word's duration?

More and more, the rhetorical question of becoming (with/in) words appears given to an impatient and reactionary wonder over what to say about the next (damn) thing.

Anticipation seems the order of the day: Greece on the brink (an on again—off again expiration that must surely have some subtle implications for the field's psyche); the redefinition of total war by way of drone strikes on citizens; the blistering pace of social media that promise to rally spring without disclosing what may well be their complete inability to plan for summer's heat. (I say this partly with regard to the alleged emergence – a giving of form and the granting of status [as evidence] – to whatever it is that is or is not happening in a New York park. It may yet be useful to recall Arendt's argument about the significance of appearing in public, though I also believe that its full ontological implications appear only late in *The Human Condition*, as she links the speech and action that enables the promise of politics and beckons the ethical question its forgiveness).

In any case, as the events pile up, the accumulation of *kairos* begins to feel more like entropy, a sensation that is exacerbated by evident and complicated forms of (self) *distraction*, a violent pull in multiple directions that comes at the cost of thinking two thoughts at once. At some level, this is a live and lived problem that's not very hard to track; as you greet people in the halls, at the start of meetings, over coffee, listen for how and how often our friends, colleagues, strangers reply to inquiries into their condition by saying, “I am busy.” About a year ago, after a day in which nearly all of my exchanges began and pretty much ended with this expression, I banned it from my vocabulary. An admittedly useful little machine (perhaps an example of what Lundberg calls “stupid repetition”), its power is an ability to obscure that the *professed* dissolution of choice can easily enough turn an ethics of vulnerability into a plausibly deniable (and quite self-certain) defense mechanism. And, with a turn, this self-interest can underwrite a profound disinterest in language, at least as anything that might operate as more than a given instrument.

To carry the banner of the sad lonely working group, for a moment, I wonder if *disinterest* is a defining feature of contemporary public-political life. A pronounced aversion to not just thinking but weaving the question of the conditions of talk (the experience of the question of talk) into the fabric of exchange-*ability* and response-*ability*, it manifests in the interlocking assumptions that express-ability is given, free (or freeing), and not all that

¹ See below on the relation between potentiality, deliberation and action in Aristotle's account.

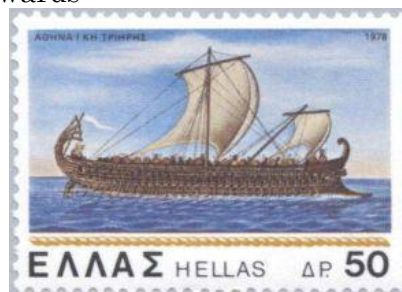
relevant insofar as the expression of *doxa* can be (best) taken as the peddling of bias, a corrupted and corrupting line (Thinking with Davis: *zoon logon echon* – the human being that **has** speech – endures so long as word’s expression rests on a “relation” that amounts to a cut between theory and practice. With Kaplan, I have appreciation for his willingness to say something that we need to hear, though I think that the “achievement” of publicity may be an idea underwritten by institutions that use contingency as a normative weapon).²

The present clamor and quietude (they blur in a curious way) is stitched with a common concern to root out corruption. In the name of accountability, the task at hand is to unveil corrupt(ing) words and words that sponsor corruption. More than a few have trained their eye on the “universities” (one is like every other, from community college to R-1). We, (a ‘we’ predicated on the notion of faculty governance still meaning something) have taken the money, slipped our hands into our solipsistic research (the accusation is not one of laziness so much as masturbation), and set students to wander (for more than four years) in the tall grass of ideas, a terrain that renders them vulnerable to socialist snakes and from which they emerge unprepared for the real world. Our promises are thus hollow, not least in the humanities, a set of pursuits that either (the argument cleaves) trade in non-marketable jargon or fails in the task of rendering little Wally suitably literate. We need to hear the argument (and we are reluctant).

In the word: endless and wearying anticipation; idling distraction; pronounced disinterest. Individually and together, these possibilities betray that rhetorical (im)potential can be understood and deployed as a call to wait, as an invitation to sacrifice the moment in the name of what is yet and not yet to come of history . Linked very tightly to the dynamics of emergency, the paradigmatic contemporary instantiation of this logic is the rationalization of South African apartheid, a system that was composed and calibrated through a discourse of potential that mobilized a given and founding word into a call to cease speaking in a time of being divided and wait for being’s coming time of unity. If apartheid created, as Nelson Mandela put it, a ‘zoo of being,’ its cage was shaped as a tire, a necklace, that circumscribed and barred its prisoners from touching the present.

Now, with the help of McCartney and Lennon, we go backwards:

*When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be.
And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be.*



Did Socrates hope for a sea battle tomorrow? Maybe just a little? Tried and convicted of corrupting (*diaphtheiro*) the city’s youth with his impious

² In short: Glenn Beck and John Stewart are far less counterparts than functions of one another. The matter can be pursued in a number of directions. For those making up for a squandered youth with a political mid-life crisis premised on the need to shriek (a gender neutral mode of expression), there is little reason to worry when, for one telling instance, a U.S. representative’s characterization of Planned Parenthood is followed by a press release noting that “His remark was not intended to be a factual statement.” And for those on the other side of the fence (or in the park), the grand oratory of “yes, we can” is now (selectivity) recalled as the beginning of hypocrisy (our public speaking textbooks are remiss in not teaching that these may be times in which one gets only a single chance to perform eloquence) and an occasion to wallow in a nostalgic sense of civility that trades advocacy for self-righteous and vacuous proclamation, e.g. “Global justice now!”

words, Socrates is left to wait. Unable to convince fellow citizen that their condemnation was nothing less than a misuse of God's gift, a gift embodied in Socrates himself and manifest in his words, death must come – but not yet. By chance (*tukhē*), according to Phaedo's report, the law's ruling against Socrates appears in a moment of sacred obligation, a call borne in the Athenian's vow to Apollo that they will remember the return of Theseus by setting "his" ship to sail on a round trip to Delos. And the wrinkle? For the duration of this annual voyage dedicated to honoring the founder of Athens (and the abductor of Helen), "the city must be kept pure, and no public executions may take place" (Phaedo, 57c).

Socrates lives in the law's suspension of itself, an act of faith that sets identity into fundamental question.³ He lives, as Derrida put it in his delicate photographic reflection on the moment, in the "delay between the speaking of the verdict and the taste of the *pharmakon* in his mouth," a delay defined by an incalculable time and the unobservable motion of a voyage. This interval rests on neither fate nor choice.⁴ On the cusp of passing away, the remainder of Socrates' life (and the occasion to reflect on the question of its remainder – the very question of coming-to-be that focuses the *Phaedo's* dialogue) abides in the uncertain duration of a ship's "procession" and the undecidable but altogether decisive moment of return; it is held within and between the movements of *theōria*, a path of discovery that betrays the law's contingency and calls the condemned to lyric's voice. Before a death that he claims to neither want nor fear (the case changes as one looks across the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*), Socrates replies to the "uncertain meaning" of his dreams by forsaking deliberative speech and composing a mythic hymn that he offers in reply to the God's calling. (Phaedo, 61a).⁵ Waiting for a return, the return of a ship on a sacred voyage that will begin the return of the soul to the realm of the divine, he confronts the limit of one mode of expression and turns to another, a shift that subtly grounds the dialogue's case for why the pure love of the imperishable soul, and its capacity to avoid the rage of (law-negating) hypocrisy and embrace others, hinges on refusing "arguments which seem to be sometimes true and sometimes false" and striving for an argument (*logos*) yet to be discovered, a *dunamis* that will turn (back) the corrupted word and render it (once again) worthy of the power to name.⁶

So many turns, all of them with a twist. In being given to death, Socrates undertakes a seemingly inexplicable turn (toward the inexplicable), a turn from the precedent-invoking and promise-issuing *logos* of legal defense and deliberation to an inspired praise of life's gift – right now. Between the corrupt and pure word (neither of which are fully locatable), and standing (without standing) between coming-to-be and passing away, he confesses an experience of (a) being turned, of being called to those words that have never been his own, the *making-language* of poetry. And, in these rhythms, he discovers a muse, a sense

³ The fundamental identity question is embodied in what we know today as "The paradox of Theseus' ship."

⁴ Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 29-31.

⁵ "Clearing of conscience" (Phaedo, 61b) is interesting but a convenient translation. The theory imagery is explicit, not least the vision of the runner and the spectator (Phaedo, 60e, 100a)

⁶ On the linkage between the misanthrope and the misologic, and its implication of an argument to come, *Phaedo* (89d-90d; On the name and the question of its purity, Phaedo (103c);

recognition that confounds the temptation of a tragic gesture – an assumption of the law’s capacity to pronounce judgment – with the self-relinquishing gift of prayer (Phaedo, 61a-b).⁷

Socrates lives so long as the voyage continues, so long as “his” ship does not come in, so long as *theoria* does not (re)turn to the end’s of law, whose evident contingency (conditioned on the divine), despite the plea of friendship, is deemed insufficient to justify an escape. If so, it is very difficult not to wonder whether Aristotle is showing more than a bit of cheek when, in book 9 of *On Interpretation*, he takes up the problem of future contingents by asking after the very thing that would have kept the hemlock in the cupboard – the necessity of a sea-battle tomorrow. But then again, perhaps he is also showing a debt.

In what Elizabeth Anscombe called the “starting point for the development of [his] notion of potentiality,” Aristotle contends, “The existence of what is when it is, and the non-existence of what isn’t when it isn’t, is necessary. But still, for everything that is to be is not necessary, nor for everything that isn’t not to be. For it isn’t the same: for everything that is to be of necessity when it is, and: for it simply to be of necessity. And the same for what isn’t. And the same reasoning applies to the *antiphrasis*. For it is necessary that everything should be or not, and should be going to be or not. But it is not the case, separately speaking, that either of the sides is necessary. I mean *e.g.* that it is necessary that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow or not, but that it is not necessary that there should be a sea-battle tomorrow, nor that it should not happen....This is how it is for what is not always existent or not always non-existent. For such things it is necessary that a side of the *antiphrasis* should be true or false, but not this one or that one, but which ever happens.”⁸

The matter, as Aristotle puts it (he is being cheeky again), “is not without difficulty.”⁹ For that “which is not always existent or not always non-existent,” for what may or may not come-to-be and pass-away, “one of the two propositions in such instances must be true and the other false, but we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must leave the alternative undecided.”¹⁰ But here, in the midst of potentiality, we have to hear two of Aristotle’s arguments at once.¹¹ On the one side, he contends that in a moment of not being able to say, saying is all we can do: “For we see that *things that are going to be* take their start from deliberating and acting, and equally that there is in general a possibility (McKeon: potentiality) of being and not being in things that are not always actual. In them, both are open, both being and not being, and so also both becoming and not becoming.”¹² On the other side, we have to hear the caveat with which *On Interpretation* begins, Aristotle’s claim that he is restricting his inquiry to a consideration of the proposition and that “only such are propositions as have in them either truth or falsity.” The distinguishing example that Aristotle then provides is prayer, a sentence that is not a proposition owing to the fact

⁷ Hamacher on prayer. Buber on Prophetic

⁸ On Interpretation, Ch. 9 (Anscombe, 6-8). G.E.M Anscombe, “Aristotle and the Sea Battle,” *Mind* (1956).

⁹ On Interpretation, 21a (McKeon)

¹⁰ On Interpretation, 19a (McKeon)

¹¹ See the discussion of three “positions” of potentiality in respect to actuality in On Interpretation, 23a

¹² On Interpretation, 19a (Anscombe, 5)

that it is neither true nor false. And where does prayer belong? The reply is explicit – “it belongs rather in the study of rhetoric or of poetry.”¹³

Under what conditions or by what power will there be rhetoric tomorrow? What can we make anew of the passage in the *Rhetoric* that we have cited and recited in the last days?

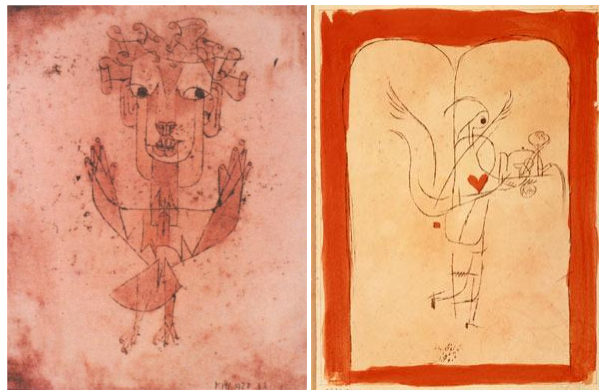
“Rhetoric then may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.” (Freese)

“Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Kennedy)

“Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” (Rhys Roberts)

Do these first lines – and they are first lines, if one considers the critique from which they emerge – of the second chapter compose a definition that speaks to the (non)necessity of a future contingency? Or is it a prayer, a self-unraveling assertion (*antiphrasis*) that begins to let rhetoric be, that sets out rhetoric as an experience of language’s becoming language, an experiencing of the word out of our hands and given to that whose meaning we cannot define – language’s coming to be itself, now? Or is it both, the appearance of a *dunamis* that rests on and takes exception to actuality? As a passage, the passage at 1355b renders us vulnerable to language and sets us into a moment in which its power is self-corrupting, neither subject nor object, but the turn between, a discovery along whose path we are not divested of the tragic status of the being that possesses the word but called to make way for (its) response-ability, translate-ability, and the flash of recognize-ability.

For now, rhetorical potentiality as the experience of hearing language lament its corruption and striving for a gesture of hospitality that begins a critique of violence in which there is no sanction for lying. Or to put it differently, perhaps Aristotle did not let Socrates not escape. Or, to put it yet another way, and this is the real argument: At a moment in which Walter Benjamin was thinking most creatively about language and standing before the images that Paul Klee painted in 1920, he may have purchased the wrong one, perhaps tragically.



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920) Paul Klee, *Angel Brings What is Desired* (1920)

¹³ On Interpretation 17a (McKeon)