

2. The role of Socrates as lover of speeches in the *Phaedrus*.

Alcibiades likens Socrates to a Silenus – what you see is not what you get.¹ And as the outer surface of Socrates may be deceiving, so too can the outer surface of a Platonic dialogue. On a first read, it might appear that the dialogues heavily contradict one another, and it is on one of these seeming contradictions that I will focus here. Is Socrates a lover of speeches? While The *Symposium*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias* seem to indicate that he is nothing of the sort, in the *Phaedrus* it is many times mentioned quite explicitly that he is. What is the reader to make of this? I propose that what at first appears a contradiction is not, and that an analysis of the content surrounding the statements of Socrates' opinions on speeches will show that 'speech' does not have a single meaning, but one that alters in accordance to its surrounding content.

Even on its own the *Symposium* seems to bear the inconsistency of having Socrates, on the one hand, disavow any proficiency in giving speeches and yet, on the other had, agree to enter into a speaking contest. Yet, what seems as Socrates' true nature, one opposed to speeches, comes through when he excuses himself from giving a speech and questions Agathon on the nature of love instead² and later reports back the question/answer session he once had with Diotima.³ For when his turn comes to provide a eulogy to Eros, he first returns to his claim that Agathon's speech was so excellent that he is ashamed to follow, connecting the *Symposium* immediately to the *Gorgias*. For Socrates responds to Agathon's speech by proclaiming, "Agathon's speech reminded me of *Gorgias*, you see, so what I was afraid of was that he would end his speech by sending the head of the formidable orator Gorgias against my speech, which would rob me of my voice and so turn me to stone."⁴ He then later excuses himself from his speech by claiming that when he promised to give a eulogy of his own, he was unaware of what the others meant by 'eulogy'.⁵

The connection to the *Gorgias* is now complete and a similar issue is here brought up. Following Polus' speech, Socrates responds that although Polus has learnt how to make a speech, he is still lacking the skill of answering a question.⁶ Polus is well versed in the forms a speech may take but not the content of speeches and it is the content rather than the form that is important to philosophers, and it is on this point that I will now take a closer look at Socrates' self-description as 'lover'.

That Socrates is described as a lover should not surprise us. For Socrates is a philosopher and the post of philosopher is that of erotic. In the *Symposium* Socrates appears as a self-described lover and is in this state that his philosophy lives. For it is the philosopher who is most erotic. The philosopher, or friend of wisdom, is not someone who has truth, but one who desires it. And his desire for it edges him on to it. Whether the philosopher ever has access to truth in this life, or must wait till death takes him to the dwelling place of forms is uncertain. The point here is that Socrates is a lover as he is a philosopher and therefore when it is said that Socrates is a lover of speeches, we should

¹ (*Symposium*, 216d)

² *Symp.* 199c-201c

³ (201d-212a)

⁴ (*Symp.* 198c)

⁵ (*Symp.* 198b-199b)

⁶ (((citation)))

not forget that this too may have something to do with philosophy. Socrates does not love speeches in and of themselves, but loves them as a means to doing philosophy. The similarities between the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* go even deeper, for the *Symposium* is also a dialogue made up, almost entirely, of speeches and Socrates' reaction to such speeches bears familiarity from one to the other.

It is not only in the *Phaedrus* that we witness Socrates dodging custody of his speeches. In neither the *Symposium* nor the *Phaedrus* does Socrates take credit for his speeches. Thus, both in dialogues depicting Socrates as one uninterested in speeches and in the *Phaedrus*, he always seems removed from the speeches he gives – they are not his. Just as, it seems, one's love or one's art is not one's own⁷.

There is a rather intimate connection between philosophy and logos – and logos does not mean only words, but reason. And the link it shares with philosophy grows out from both its meanings – for philosophy uses reason to explore its arguments but also uses words, in the form of speech, to enter dialogue. And here too we must take a pause, for although it is many times pointed out that Socrates cannot make nor understand long speeches⁸, to call Socrates a lover of speeches, says nothing of the length of the speeches he loves. It also says nothing of the form of speech he prefers. For the Socratic elenchus is also a type of speech. We should not from such comments draw the conclusion that Socrates is against all speeches. Philosophy relies on the exchange of ideas, and thus words or logos. Thus, if Socrates is a lover of wisdom or truth, he is intimately connected to logos and may be described in this fashion as a lover of speeches – but speeches in a limited sense – speeches that further philosophy.

Speech here is then in the context of content rather than mere words. For what speech can do is enter a dialogue. And Socrates places great importance on the structure of speech, not for reasons of convincing majorities one argument over the other, but because the structure of philosophical speech calls for the establishment of definitions. For is this not what Socrates keeps on his interlocutors about? Philosophy is interested in definitions, true definitions, and it is interesting to note that, here, a good speech is that which begins with a definition. *Phaedrus* confirms that Socrates did define love at the beginning of his speech,⁹ but they see that Lysias had not. At which point Socrates criticises Lysias' speech, saying, 'He doesn't even start from the beginning but from the end.'¹⁰ As definitions are critical to philosophy, it seems as if the speechmaking Socrates speaks of here is one geared towards that craft.

There is a reason Socrates distances himself from his speeches both in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Socrates sees himself rather as a medium through which the gods may speak. In the *Symposium*, he acts as the mouthpiece to Diotima, in the *Phaedrus*, it is to the nymphs and others that he provides audience. And always he has his daemon to take him off the wrong path. It is not the speech as much as that his speech is inspired that matters here. And Socrates as inspired philosopher is possessed by the gods, through which, he has a closer relationship with the truth. He cannot take credit for the speeches he provides because they are not, strictly speaking, his own. Yet it is not simply about distancing himself by crediting another, he also seems to say that he himself becomes

⁷ explain.

⁸ Protagoras 334c-335c, Gorgias 449b-c, 461d-462a

⁹ 263d

¹⁰ 264a

other than himself when he is giving these speeches. Socrates says, “Don’t you realize that the Nymphs to whom you so cleverly exposed me will take complete possession of me?”¹¹

Is this a lesson the reader is supposed to draw from these dialogues? If the inspired speech, an art in its own right, is the only kind worthy of being called an art? What is philosophy? For if what the philosopher does is act as a medium between humans and gods, then the philosopher is nothing but a mouthpiece. I cannot answer these questions here, but it seems a point worth raising. If Socrates has access to truth because the gods speak through him, then, it seems, it is not Socrates doing the work of philosophy, but the gods. Socrates is then only a tool. What then is a philosopher?

It seems that there is at least two ways one is to understand ‘speech’ in the *Phaedrus*. One as Phaedrus uses the term and the other as Socrates uses it. Phaedrus plays a role closer to that of Polus’s in the *Gorgias*. Speech here depicts the form of speech making, rather than much attention to the content. For Socrates, however, speech bears closer relations to philosophy and therefore it is content that matters rather than limiting speech to a formal construct. Let us not forget that elsewhere Socrates says, ‘the excellence of a... speaker lies in telling the truth.’¹² And he repeats here, quoting a Spartan, ‘there is no genuine art of speaking without a grasp of truth, and there never will be.’¹³ The discussion on rhetoric begins with just such a contrast. Socrates asks whether it is important for the person who is to speak well to ‘have in mind the truth about the subject he is going to discuss?’¹⁴ To which, Phaedrus responds that what he’s heard is that, ‘it is not necessary for the intending orator to learn what is really just, but only what will seem just to the crowd who will act as judges. Nor again what is really good or noble, but only what will seem so. For that is what persuasion proceeds from, not truth.’¹⁵ Thus, while Socrates is focusing on that which is essential to philosophy, speech furthering philosophy, Phaedrus is concentrating on the ‘art’ of speech making – the power of speeches to persuade. The connection between Phaedrus and speechmaking is further depicted by his love of Lysias, one talented in persuasive speaking, but not philosophy.

Are Phaedrus and Socrates talking past each other or is Socrates aware of this inconsistency? Not only is Socrates the first to bring up speeches in general, proclaiming that Lysias must have been entertaining Phaedrus with ‘a feast of eloquence’¹⁶ but he is also the first to bring up the idea that he’s a lover of speeches.¹⁷ It seems that while they are talking past each other, Socrates is perfectly aware of it. Socrates is calling the shots in this dialogue, yet making it seem like Phaedrus is the one making all the suggestions. From leading Phaedrus to their final resting one¹⁸ to bringing up the suggestion of giving

¹¹ (241e.)

¹² (Apology 18a)

¹³ 260e

¹⁴ (Phaed. 259e)

¹⁵ (Phaed. 260a)

¹⁶ (Phaed. 227b)

¹⁷ (footnote: ‘And running into a man who is *sick with passion for hearing speeches*... Phaed. 228b Italics added)

¹⁸ Socrates leads the way to where their eventual resting spot, for although Phaedrus is the first to ask Socrates where they should sit (228e), Socrates suggests leaving the path they are on and walking along the

his own speech to rival the speech of Lysias¹⁹, Socrates seems to be leading Phaedrus to philosophy, via speech.

And as Socrates leads Phaedrus, the text leads the reader. For what at first seems a dialogue set in two parts – one on love and the other on rhetoric and writing – is but one. The reason the theme of love does not continue on throughout the dialogue but stops halfway through is because it is linked not in love but in philosophy and uses love as a pathway. As beauty leads to philosophy, speech is used by it. Thus, both parts of the text feed off one another and both link logos to truth.

Socrates not only leads Phaedrus, but does so covertly. But where is Socrates leading Phaedrus? It seems he is leading him to philosophy. It is obvious from the *Phaedrus* that he is a boy much in love with the art of speechmaking. Not so much the content it seems, but the structure. That Socrates' first speech is similar to that of Lysias' is telling. For Socrates knew Phaedrus was in love with that speech, therefore he used one like it to draw him closer. When this had succeeded, Socrates knew suggesting a second speech would excite Phaedrus, and in this one, he explains how beauty leads one to philosophy. Once Socrates has Phaedrus, he brings him in, exposing him to the beauty and truth of philosophy, but he does not do it through his own words, he gives an inspired tale, thus giving Phaedrus the truth of philosophy, not his opinion of it. That is one interpretation.

Phaedrus shares the majority's understanding of the art of speechmaking and thus, when Socrates starts questioning him on the matter, he is quite confused as to what Socrates is getting at. Yet, Socrates pushes on with what seems to be a reluctant Phaedrus, for they have very opposing views of what the art is. Is Socrates doing so to win Phaedrus over? One suggestion is that Phaedrus ran amongst influential circles, thus to win him over meant getting across his definition to those circles. Thus, whether or not Phaedrus became a philosopher, he could still get the message to his friends. Was this Socrates' aim? It seems unlikely, for it does not appear in Socrates' character to care much for influencing 'important' political circles. He seems more inclined to devoting himself to philosophical conversations of the immediate variety.

Yet, wherever Socrates is leading Phaedrus and whatever he intends for him, Socrates is espousing a philosophy of speeches that bears no relation to what the majority believes speechmaking to be, and if we take a closer look at Socrates' meaning, it seems that what a true or good speech is is that which furthers philosophy, not one that entertains the masses. Socrates is a lover of speeches – for he is a philosopher, a lover of truth – and the two are inseparable.

Ilissus (229a). From that point on it seems that Phaedrus is leading, but Socrates has already pointed them towards a special spot. Yet, it is not just place one must keep in mind here, but state of mind. Although Socrates never leaves the city (note), he knows the place better than Phaedrus. Phaedrus asks whether they are at the very spot 'Boreas carried Oreithuia away' (229b) and Socrates corrects him, pointing out a spot 'three hundred yards farther downstream' (229c). Socrates has led them here, he has set up not only the place but the background for the conversation to follow.

¹⁹ There are three speeches in the *Phaedrus* and although Socrates makes it seem as if Phaedrus is forcing him to speak, in each instance, Socrates is the one suggesting a speech is called for.