

The Question of Rhetoric in Nietzsche and Arendt

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When we think of the question of rhetoric, we cannot ignore a historical shift that took place in the conception of rhetoric. This shift is most evident in Nietzsche's thought. In the classical tradition, rhetoric was understood in terms of a coherent set of rules that govern discursive practices, a doctrine of discursive production and interpretation, and a system or method of education. However, according to John Bender and David Wellberry in "Rhetorality: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric," modernism, especially Nietzsche's thought on rhetoric, brought a significant change in its meaning whereby it shifted from the classical conception of rhetoric to what they call "rhetorality."¹

In "Rhetorality" Bender and Wellberry speak of the demise of rhetoric; they describe how in the historical development of Western culture, the Enlightenment and Romanticism had destroyed the basis of the rhetorical tradition. Specifically, the ideal of scientific objectivity in the Enlightenment had led to the denunciation of the illusions of a discourse, religious dogma and oppression, and the power of persuasion. And the value of "the originating power of subjectivity" (R 19) or "the inner movements of subjectivity" (R 21) in Romanticism had contributed to the decline of rhetoric; the orality as the inner voice of the subject had replaced the orality as public-oriented oratorical communication. Yet, after this destruction of rhetoric, it reappears in modernism; the conditions of rhetoric's impossibility have crumbled and the conditions for its renaissance have been created. Bender and Wellberry hold that modernism is "an age not of rhetoric, but of rhetorality." In contrast to classical rhetoric, rhetorality does not

¹ John Bender and David Wellberry, "Rhetorality: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric" in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*. Edited by John Bender and David Wellberry. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, pp.3-39. Henceforth cited as R.

belong to a rule-governed domain. It reveals itself in "the groundless, infinitely ramifying character of discourse in the modern world." Instead of "the title of a doctrine and a practice," rhetoric becomes "something like the condition of our existence." They suggest that this modernist shift in the meaning of rhetoric is found in Nietzsche, in whose view rhetoric is no longer a doctrine which has an instrumental character, but is "a kind of immemorial process — an a priori that thought can never bring under its control precisely because thought itself is one of the effects of that process" (R 27).

First I would like to discuss the nature of rhetoric as an immemorial process in terms of Nietzsche's notion of "the unhistorical" presented in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*.² In this work (published in 1874), Nietzsche criticizes the modern German culture by describing how it is suffering from "the malady of history". He argues that the excess of history has attacked life's plastic powers and that the German culture, lacking its basis, no longer knows how to employ the past as a nourishing food. As the medicine for this malady of history, as the "natural antidote" to "the historical," he presents "the unhistorical" and "the suprahistorical." For Nietzsche, the expression "the unhistorical" means "the art and power of forgetting and of enclosing oneself with a bounded horizon," and the expression "the suprahistorical" means "the eternalizing powers of art and religion" (UDH 120). Nietzsche depicts "the unhistorical" or the power of forgetting as "the ability to forget, the capacity to feel unhistorically during its duration," or as "the capacity to sink down on the thresholds of the moment and forget all the past" (UDH 62). It is also regarded as "the vaporous regions," "the encompassing cloud," or "the atmosphere" within which every great historical event has taken place (UDH 63-64). He writes:

We shall . . . have to account for the capacity to feel to a certain degree unhistorically as being more vital and more fundamental, inasmuch as it constitutes the foundation upon which alone anything sound, healthy and

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 57-123. Henceforth cited as UDH.

great, anything truly human, can grow. The unhistorical is like atmosphere within which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish. (UDH 63-64)

He also regards this unhistorical cloud as "the womb." He says, "This condition is the womb not only of the unjust but of every just deed too; and no painter will paint his picture, no general achieve his victory, no people attain its freedom without having first desired and striven for it in an unhistorical condition such as that described" (UDH 64). Nietzsche stresses that "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture" (UDH 63). He writes:

Cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, confidence in the future -- all of them depend, in the case of the individual as of a nation . . . on one's being just as able to forget at the right time as to remember at the right time; on the possession of a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. (UDH 63)

Thus Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of the powerful instinct of sensing both when to feel historically and when to feel unhistorically. Later in the same text, he holds that the Greeks kept "a tenacious hold on their unhistorical sense" during the period of their greatest strength (UDH 79). In other words, they kept the powerful instinct for finding the right time to feel unhistorically. He criticizes modern culture on the grounds that it is oversaturated with history, and hence disrupts the instincts of an individual, of a people and of a culture. Modern man who is "the reasonable man" suffers from a weakened sense of seeing and hearing:

He who wants to understand, grasp and assess in a moment that before which he ought to stand long in awe as before an incomprehensible sublimity may be called reasonable, but only in the sense in which Schiller speaks of the rationality of the reasonable man: there are things he does not see which even a child sees, there are things he does not hear which even a child hears, and these things are precisely the most important things The reason is that he has long and destroyed his instincts and, having lost his trust in the 'divine animal', he can no

longer let go the reins when his reason falters and this path leads him through deserts. (UDH 83-84)

Destroying this instinct also means destroying the power of "the unhistorical," or destroying the atmosphere in which illusions can live -- the "enveloping illusion," the "protective and veiling cloud." As Nietzsche argues, "When the historical sense reigns *without restraint*, and all its consequences are realized, it uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs the things that exist of the atmosphere in which alone they can live" (UDH 95). He holds that the modern German people possess no culture, for they are "ruined for right and simple seeing and hearing, for happily seizing what is nearest and most natural" to them (UDH 119). He further attacks the modern education by saying that it shatters "the instinct of nature" that youth still possesses (UDH 117-118).

At the end of "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Nietzsche presents a parable of the course of the cure from the malady of history. He describes how the Greeks were confronted by a danger similar to the danger that faces modern people, that is to say, "the danger of being overwhelmed by what was past and foreign, of perishing through 'history'" (UDH 122). The Greek 'culture' was "a chaos of foreign, Semitic, Babylonian, Lydian, Egyptian forms and ideas, and their religion truly a battle of all the gods of the East" (UDH 122). Yet, according to Nietzsche, the Greeks gradually learned to "organize the chaos by following the Delphic teaching and thinking back to themselves, that is, to their real needs" (UDH 122). This parable shows how it is important for each individual to "organize the chaos within him by thinking back to his real needs" (UDH 123). In other words, he must return to "the instinct of nature" within him. Only by doing so can he be cured from the malady of history. Nietzsche describes how in ancient Greek society, culture was not "a decoration of life," but "a new and improved physis" (UDH 123). In this culture, "the instinct of nature" of an individual and of a people was maintained. The power of "the unhistorical" (the power of "forgetting and of enclosing oneself with a bounded horizon") was preserved.

It is this power of instinct (or "a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically") that underlies Nietzsche's understanding of rhetoric. One could say that his arguments in "On the Uses and

Disadvantages of History for Life" and those in the lectures on rhetoric, "Description of Ancient Rhetoric" are interrelated. In his lectures on rhetoric offered at the University of Basel in 1872 and 1873, he presents his understanding of rhetoric. At the beginning of the first lecture, he stresses the differences between the ancients and moderns, presenting contrasting images of the two; whereas the ancients "live in mythic images," the moderns live in "crude empiricism." He observes that modern people are not free from "the unqualified need of historical accuracy." He writes:

The extraordinary development of the concept of rhetoric belongs to the specific differences between the ancients and moderns: in recent times, this art stands in some disrepute, and even when it is used, the best application to which it is put by our moderns is nothing short of dilettantism and crude empiricism. Generally speaking, the feeling for what is true in itself is much more developed: rhetoric arises among a people who still live in mythic images and who have not yet experienced the unqualified need of historical accuracy: they would rather be persuaded than instructed.³

Here Nietzsche gives a contrast between "instruction" and "persuasion." The verb "instruct" is linked to the characteristics of modern culture while the verb "persuade" is linked to those of the ancient culture. He adds that the art of "persuasion" (not "instruction") is "the highest spiritual activity of the well-educated political man" in the ancient culture:

In addition, the need of men for forensic eloquence must have given rise to the evolution of the liberal art The education of the ancient man customarily culminates in rhetoric: it is the highest spiritual activity of the well-educated political man -- an odd notion for us! (DAR 3)

Thus in Nietzsche the concept of rhetoric is presented as what cannot be grasped in the framework of modern culture. He suggests that the modern man has lost "the instinct" that the ancient man had.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Description of Ancient Rhetoric" in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*. Edited and translated by Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 3. Henceforth cited as DAR.

We recall here that in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" Nietzsche describes how the reasonable man in modernity has lost the "natural" ability to see and hear. In ancient rhetoric, the ability to hear is very important, for rhetoric appeals to the ear. For example, he makes a comparison between the modern prose and "the true prose of antiquity." He thinks that the former is something that is written and has to be *read*. The latter is based on public speaking and has to be *heard*. He writes:

In general, all ancient literature, above all the Roman literature, appears to be somewhat artificial and rhetorical to us, who are unrefined speech empiricists. This has a deeper reason also, in the fact that the true prose of antiquity is an echo of public speech and is built upon its laws, whereas our prose is always to be explained more from *writing*, and our style presents itself as something to be perceived through *reading*. He who reads, and the one who hears, desire wholly different presentational form, and this is the reason that ancient literature seems "rhetorical" to us; viz., it appeals chiefly to the ear, in order to bribe it. (DAR 21)

In relation to this idea of rhetoric as what appeals to "the ear," he observes that among the Greeks and Romans, one finds "an extraordinary development of the sense of rhythm" (DAR 21).⁴

⁴ In "On Rhythm" (1875), Nietzsche asserts that rhythm and rhyme give rise to "a blind agreement with what is read, prior to all judgment." He writes, "The more excitable and natural a person is, the more rhythm acts upon him as a *compulsion* to repeat the rhythm and produces that 'blind attunement prior to all judgment.'" For Nietzsche, the magic in rhythm is based on an elementary symbolism by which "the regular and the orderly imposes itself on our understanding as a higher realm, a life above and beyond this irregular life; that part of us which has the power to move with the same rhythm follows the urging of that symbolic feeling and moves in unison with it or at least feels a strong urge to do so." So the magical power of rhythm is linked to ascending to a higher realm, or the urge to alleviate the pressure of existence by going beyond our irregular painful life. "On Rhythm" in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, pp. 244-245. Henceforth cited as OR.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche also holds that rhythm effects a "compulsion": it "engenders an unconquerable urge to yield and join in." This suggests that the rhythmic force affects the level of the body and of the unconscious. Further he writes that rhythm compels the future by gaining the favor of Apollo. He holds that the magical power of rhythm was the most useful thing for the Greeks: "What could have been more useful for the ancient, superstitious type of man than rhythm? It enabled one to do anything -to advance some work magically; to force a god to appear, to be near, and to listen; to mold the future in accordance with one's will; to cleanse one's own soul from some excess (of anxiety, mania, pity, or vengefulness) -- and not only one's own soul but also that of the

The idea of rhetoric as what appeals to "the ear" is also linked to the "deviation from nature" that Nietzsche discusses in *The Gay Science*. He argues that the ancient Greek culture was based on the people's need to hear beautiful speeches, that is, the need to hear "the deviation from nature." It was "truly greedy craving" to hear people speak well (GS 134). Nietzsche explains this craving as follows:

We have developed a need that we cannot satisfy in reality: to hear people in the most difficult situations speak well and at length; we are delighted when the tragic hero still finds words, reasons, eloquent gestures, and altogether intellectual brightness, where life approaches abysses and men in reality usually lose their heads and certainly linguistic felicity. This kind of *deviation from nature* is perhaps the most agreeable repast for human pride: for its same man loves art as the expression of a lofty, heroic unnaturalness and convention . . . nature is *supposed to be* contradicted. (GS 134)

This "need" to hear beautiful speeches found in the ancient Greeks is the need to witness (with the ear) the transmutation of the natural into art, that is, "art as the expression of a lofty, heroic unnaturalness and convention."

It is on this "deviation from nature" or artificiality that Nietzsche's understanding of rhetoric is grounded. Indeed he defines rhetoric in light of "a conscious application of artistic means of speaking." He writes, "We call an author, a book, or a style 'rhetorical' when we observe a conscious application of artistic means of speaking; it always implies a gentle reproof. We consider it to be not *natural*, and as producing the impression of being done purposefully" (DAR 21).

Yet we have to note that although rhetoric is essentially artificial, it is an art that never allows its own artificiality to become noticeable.⁵ Nietzsche says that

most evil demon: without verse one was nothing; by means of verse one almost became a god. Such a fundamental feeling can never be erased entirely; and even now, after men have fought against such superstitions for thousands of years, the wisest among us are still occasionally fooled by rhythm." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufman. New York: Vintage Books, 1974, p. 140. Henceforth cited as GS.

⁵ In the lectures on rhetoric, Nietzsche compares rhetoric to a theatrical art. According to him, the

"it is the mark of art to conceal art." In other words, the art of the orator is based on deception. In "On Rhythm," he holds that the poets and musicians want "something against the nature of existence" -- "they can deceive themselves and others about the nature of existence only for a short time - this deception is, after all, the essence of art" (OR 245). Thus he regards the concept of rhetoric as what conceals its own essence of artificiality or the "deviation from nature."

Moreover, he holds that rhetoric, as the art of language, uses language as its material, and that language is something paradoxical in the sense that it has "the purposefulness in nature" (to be discussed below). In the fourth lecture on rhetoric, Nietzsche compares rhetoric to a plastic art. He writes, "The characteristic style is the proper domain of the art of the orator: here he practices a free *plastic* art; the language is his material which has already been prepared" (DAR 35). Thus, language is considered by Nietzsche as the material for the art of persuasion in the sense that it resembles the material for a plastic art. Then how does he understand language which is the material for the art of rhetoric? In "On the Origin of Language" (1869-70) he says, "Language is much too complex to be the work of a single individual, much too unified to be the work of a mass; it is a complete organism" (OL 209). It is "neither the conscious work of individuals nor of a plurality" (OL 209). Hence the only alternative is to regard language as "the product of an instinct, like among the bees - the anthill, etc." (OL 209). Concerning this "instinct," he writes:

Instinct, however, is not the result of conscious reflection, not a mere consequence of corporeal organization, not the effect of a mechanism located in the brain, not the work of a mechanism acting upon the mind from the outside and alien to its nature, but rather the most proper achievement of the individual, or of a mass, stemming from its very character. Instinct is even one with a being's innermost core. That is

orator "speaks like an actor who plays a role unfamiliar to him or in an unfamiliar situation The art of the orator is never to allow artificiality to become noticeable: hence, the characteristic style which, however, is all the more a product of the highest art, just like the "naturalness" of the good actor"(DAR 35). In the twelfth lecture, "The Parts of the Forensic Speech," he says, "It is also commendable to present himself as weak, unprepared, no match for his opponent: above all, one must carefully conceal one's eloquence: it is the mark of art to conceal art" (DAR 111).

the genuine problem of philosophy, the unending purposefulness of organisms and the lack of consciousness in their origin. (OL 209-210)

Later, speaking of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he writes that the essence of instinct is "teleology in nature," "the remarkable paradox that something can be purposeful without a consciousness." Here Nietzsche compares language to organic beings. Nietzsche cites Schelling where he likens language to organic beings: "Language's situation is like that of organic beings; we believe we see them originating blindly and yet we cannot deny the unfathomable intentionality of their formation down to every detail" (OL 211). Thus, for Nietzsche, language is an organism which has "unending purposefulness" or "intentionality of [its] formation." It embodies "the teleology in nature" without a consciousness.

In brief, Nietzsche's understanding of rhetoric is essentially characterized by the paradox -- "purposefulness in nature" without a consciousness. One could understand this idea of "purposefulness in nature" in relation to the power of "organizing the chaos" that Nietzsche thinks the Greeks gradually returned to. As we have seen, he holds that in the case of the Greeks this organizing power is found in "the instinct of nature" within each individual, and that it is inseparable from the power of "the unhistorical" or the power of forgetting.

Nietzsche finds in rhetoric what the modern culture has lost, namely, the power that provokes the "instinct of nature." To borrow Aristotle's definition of rhetoric that Nietzsche speaks of -- "the *dynamis* to discover and to make operative that which works and impresses," rhetoric is understood as the power to discover and to make operative the "purposefulness in nature" found within language or within an individual. Rhetoric is the art that makes use of that "purposefulness in nature" as its material. But it never allows its own artificiality to appear as long as it is an art or a deception. The notion of *dynamis* is inseparable from the power of "the unhistorical," the enveloping atmosphere in which illusions can live.

Like Nietzsche, Arendt finds in the ancient Greek society what has been lost in the modern society. For her, it is the *polis* (which resonates with her notions of "the public realm," "the space of appearance," "the world," or "plurality"). And in her thought "the *dynamis* of the *polis*" is what essentially defines rhetoric.

In Arendt rhetoric is understood in terms of the distinction between Greek men who live inside the polis and barbarians and slaves who are outside the polis.

Rhetoric draws a line of demarcation between the inside of the *polis* and the outside of the *polis*. In contrast with the barbarians and slaves who were ruled by violence or silent coercion, the Greeks who lived in the polis conducted their affairs through speech and persuasion. She writes:

Aristotle's definition of man as *zōon politikon* . . . can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zōon logon ekhon* ("a living being capable of speech") In his two most famous definitions, Aristotle only formulated the current opinion of the polis about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the *polis* - slaves and barbarians - was *aneu logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other.⁶

Barbarians and slaves were deprived "not of the faculty of speech" but "of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense," that is, of the experience of the polis. In Arendt's political thought, rhetoric is presented as the basis of the experience of the *polis*.

In other words, rhetoric involves what she calls "power" -- the power that keeps the *polis* in existence or the power that creates "the space of appearance." According to Arendt, it is action and speech that "create a space" between the participants:

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 27. Henceforth cited as HC. She also writes: "The twofold Aristotelian definition of man as ζῶον πολιτικόν and ζῶον λόγον ἔχον a being attaining his highest possibility in the faculty of speech and the life in a polis was designed to distinguish the Greek from the barbarian and the free man from the slave. The distinction was that Greeks, living together in a polis, conducted their affairs by means of speech, through persuasion (πέριθελον), and not by means of violence, through mute coercion. Hence, when free men obeyed their government, or the laws of the polis, their obedience was called περὶθελία a word which indicates clearly that obedience was obtained by persuasion and not by force. Barbarians were ruled by violence and slaves, forced to labor." "Tradition and the Modern Age" in *Between Past and Future*. London: Penguin Books, 1954, pp. 22-23.

purpose, no matter where they happen to be. "Wherever you go, you will be a polis": these words . . . expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. (HC 198)

The *polis* is not defined by its physical location. It is out of "acting and speaking together" that the polis arises. And in this space, the "who" of the agent (a unique distinctness of the individual) appears to others. She writes, "It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (HC 198-199).

We should also note that Arendt characterizes the *polis* as "the space of appearance" where freedom as action comes out of hiding, out of a "dark place" and becomes "tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen." And the notion of "power" should be understood in terms of the preservation of this public space. Arendt writes:

If, then, we understand the political in the sense of the *polis*, its end or *raison d'être* would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. This is the realm where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered, and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of human history. Whatever occurs in this space of appearance is political by definition⁷

Without the "light" of the public realm, freedom lacks "the worldly space to make its appearance." The power involves the "light" of the public realm.

Thus, like Nietzsche, what Arendt recognizes in the concept of ancient rhetoric is "power". But, for her, the word "power" is defined as "what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence" (HC 200). And she explains that its Greek equivalent is *dynamis* which she thinks should be understood in terms of its potential character. Power

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 154-155. Henceforth cited as WF.

"springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (HC 200). In Arendt's thought, while "strength" is "the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation," "power" belongs to the plurality, different people who act and speak together (Nietzsche does not focus on this aspect of *dynamis*). She also says that power is "the lifeblood of the human artifice," that is, the lifeblood of the world (HC 204). Without it, without the *dynamis* of the *polis*, "the space of appearance" will fade away.

Arendt also understands the concept of rhetoric in light of performance. In other words, the *polis* is a kind of theatrical space. She says that the meaning of action and speech lies in the performance itself and that it is "independent of victory and defeat." Action and speech "exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself." This is conceptualized in Aristotle's notion of *energeia* ("full actuality"). Full actuality produces nothing besides itself. There is no work product left behind. Also in action and speech, the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself. This is conceptualized in Aristotle's notion of *entelecheia* ("full reality") which has no other end besides itself.

Rhetoric is considered as performance which is based on the notions of *energeia* and *entelecheia*. This view is found in the following passage in "What is Freedom?" where she compares creative arts with performing arts; she says that in the case of creative arts, the end product (rather than the creating process) matters for the world:

The performing arts, on the contrary, have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists -dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like - need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their "work," and both depend upon others for the performance itself. Such a space of appearance is not to be taken for granted wherever men live together in a community. The Greek *polis* once was precisely that "form of government" which provided men with a space of appearances where they could act, with a kind of theater where freedom could appear. (WF 153-154)

What Arendt finds in rhetoric is this nature of a performing art. For her, the *polis*, the space of appearance, is a space for performance, a kind of a theater.

Politics and theatrical performance are closely linked to each other. In brief, in Arendt, as in Nietzsche, the *dynamis*, that is, the *power* is what underlies the concept of rhetoric. But while Nietzsche stresses the power to discover and to make operative "purposefulness in nature" or the power that makes the initial action of an individual possible, Arendt focuses on the power that keeps "the public realm" in existence. In Arendt, rhetoric is revealed as the power that only arises between people who are acting and speaking together and preserves the *polis*.

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