

Plato and the notion of a dialectical rhetoric:  
Pedagogical implications for composition studies

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English  
Major: English (Rhetoric and Composition)

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**For the Major Department**

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**For the Graduate College**

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

1992

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## CHAPTER ONE

One of the most significant areas of debate within the Platonic dialogues has been Plato's conception of rhetoric. This area of interpretation has been so vast and varied that it is hard to believe that everyone has been analyzing the same dialogues. However, one view has predominated, and that is the view that Plato, as seen primarily in the Gorgias and the Phaedrus, disapproved of rhetoric and writing and has historically been its fiercest opponent.

In fact, Edward Corbett blames Plato for "all the derogatory things that men have said about this art [rhetoric] down through the ages" and further says that the negative views of rhetoric "have their roots in Plato's strictures" (538). Corbett is supported in his claim by Sir Karl Popper who adds:

Finally, in forming our judgements on Plato's procedure we must not forget that Plato likes to argue against rhetoric and sophistry; and indeed that he is the man who by his attacks on the 'Sophists' created the bad associations connected with that word (quoted in Vickers 83).

In fact, Popper continues to say that Plato should be censored; a view held by many of Plato's critics.

The most often cited crimes Plato has committed to deserve his banishing and to be considered a "lifelong enemy of rhetoric" are as follows:

1. In the act of depreciating rhetoric, Plato shows himself to be a masterful rhetorician (Corbett 538).
2. Plato's view of rhetoric assumes that "knowledge of the truth as a precondition of legitimate-or 'real' rhetoric is entirely unreasonable" (Conley 14).
3. "He upheld the validity of absolutism, thereby scorning the legitimacy of probability and its counterpart, opinion" (Golden 17).
4. Plato attacked the art of rhetoric because it represented what he most disliked in Athenian life (Hunt 69).

Of course, not all of these claims are without support. However, if these claims are, indeed, accurate portrayals of Plato's doctrine concerning rhetoric and writing, then why is Plato still considered a strong force in rhetoric and compositions studies? What makes Plato redeemable from his flawed perceptions of rhetoric and writing? Hopefully, through the course of this thesis, Plato's redeemable

qualities will become clear, and the wrongheadedness of these charges against him will make themselves known. I am not entirely convinced that Plato has the right answers on all questions; I do reject his notion of Ideal Forms and the Doctrine of Recollection. But I am convinced that he has been unfairly charged in the areas of rhetoric and writing, and that there is significant value in his notion of dialectic (active learning) as a means for using language in the pursuit of knowledge.

Since these charges against Plato stem from his texts, the best place to start is in one. The Phaedrus and the Gorgias are the two dialogues most cited for their claims against rhetoric, and I would like to focus on the Phaedrus for the duration of this essay. I have chosen not to discuss the Gorgias because it discusses sophistic rhetoric only. As a result, the picture of rhetoric, sophistic rhetoric, is entirely negative. The Phaedrus, as I will show, discusses not only sophistic rhetoric, which Plato despises, but it also offers his conception of True rhetoric or dialectical rhetoric. As Edwin Black says, "Fortunately, we still have the dialogues, their durability so manifestly established that they could not be hurt by one more fresh look" (361). The following chapter will be an active, engaged investigation of the Phaedrus and an attempt at addressing Plato's concerns about rhetoric and writing.

I am providing my discussion in an order that is not typical for this kind of document. Normally, a literature review would precede a discussion of the paper topic. However, for my purposes, it is more important that I provide my own close reading of the Phaedrus first and then address the criticisms and provide a literature review. This allows me to illustrate first what I have found to be important in the Phaedrus; this interpretation will then guide how I address the critics.

I have identified four threads running through the Platonic texts that are so inextricably bound with Plato's conception of rhetoric that they must be discussed. These threads are:

1. Rhetoric and persuasion
2. Rhetoric and knowledge
3. Rhetoric and dialectic
4. Rhetoric and context

So, not only will I be illuminating what I perceive to be Plato's notions of rhetoric and writing, but I will also explore how these notions are bound to persuasion, knowledge, dialectic, and context. What follows then is a brief discussion of some of the criticisms leveled at the literariness of the Phaedrus followed by a discussion of persuasion, knowledge, dialectic, and context in relation to Plato's rhetoric. In the chapters to follow, I will address

the four charges with which I began this discussion as well as directly confront three major critics: Jacques Derrida, Brian Vickers, and Jasper Neel. In chapter three, I will apply the Platonic concepts discussed here to issues of pedagogy in general and writing instruction in particular.

### Rhetoric and Persuasion/Morality

Of all his dialogues, Plato's Phaedrus is the one which deals most fully with the subject of rhetoric. In it, "Plato expresses his criticisms of both contemporary and earlier schools of rhetoric, and he offers both theoretical and practical suggestions to improve rhetoric" (Curran 66). However, the critics of Plato view this dialogue as a poorly constructed attack on rhetoric and writing. And, the Phaedrus has received a great deal of criticism related to its unity.

The Phaedrus has traditionally been viewed as being divided into two distinct parts: the first where Lysias's speech and Socrates's two speeches are given is associated primarily with love, and the second, more conversational, with rhetoric. If these two parts were unrelated, the Phaedrus would be aptly criticized. However, as current scholars note, the two sections are both focused on rhetoric. "...Plato's purposes are not independent of one another because he was, after all, not writing a treatise but a dramatic argument" (Stewart 117).



Further, G.J DeVries states, "In the Phaedrus the central theme is the persuasive use of words. The aim of the dialogue is to show its foundation. Its means is beauty, its condition (unlike current rhetoric's) is knowledge. Eros is the striving after knowledge and after beauty. So the main subthemes of the dialogue are intertwined" (23). Therefore, the attack on the unity of the Phaedrus may simply be a result of a misreading or a one-sided reading. There are obvious connections between the two sections of the Phaedrus; the intertwining of example and practice, the passion related to love and the emotive elements of rhetoric. This intertwining in the Phaedrus also illustrates another Platonic concept: the relationship between persuasion and moral responsibility.

Plato makes a definite connection between the persuasive nature of language and the moral consequences of language. Thus, to Plato, the very act of communicating through language entails a moral responsibility. This moral responsibility is what separates Plato's rhetoric from the rhetoric of the sophists.

The difference between Sophistic rhetoric (false rhetoric) and Platonic rhetoric (true rhetoric) is explained the best in Socrates's opening statement at his trial in 399 B.C.:

I do not know what effect my accusers have had on you gentlemen, but for my own part, I was almost carried away by them--their arguments were so convincing. On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true. I was especially astonished at one of their many misrepresentations; I mean when they told you that you must be careful not to let me deceive you--the implication being that I am a skillful speaker. I thought that it was particularly brazen of them to tell you this without a blush, since they must know that they will soon be effectively confuted, when it becomes obvious that I have not the slightest skill as a speaker--unless, of course, by a skillful speaker they mean one who speaks the truth. If that is what they mean, I would agree with them that I am an orator, though not after their pattern (Apology 176).

Plato's point here is that the discourse of the Sophists is very convincing but untrue. "The Sophists argue in favor of a case--through their discourse realities are created in the minds of their auditors...without regard for ultimate truth or falsity" (Hikins 161). This type of rhetoric--use of language to manipulate--is immoral. Platonic rhetoric, on the other hand, "argues in the service of Truth--realities are not

constructed through discourse, Reality is discovered by an audience or elicited by a speaker through discourse" (Hikins 161). So, by viewing the use of language as an act of moral responsibility towards the audience, Plato inserts a moral quality into his definition of True rhetoric.

In the Phaedrus Plato uses the allegory of love as a framework on which to build a discussion of discourse. By doing so, Plato allows himself to discuss and illustrate the emotive (rhetorical) nature of language and its relationship to moral responsibility: the right and wrong ways to use discourse/persuasion. This allegory conveys Plato's ideas about the morality of human discourse:

First is the nonlover. In his acts of love, he corresponds to the rhetorician or antirhetorician who would set as the most desirable goal for human discourse its theoretical and of course unattainable complete lack of suaviseness. We think, here, of the modern Gradgrinds who in effect say that language should give us facts and nothing but the facts (Again, an unattainable goal for language). The disinterested speakers (and here 'speaker' is a generic term covering any user of discourse, including writer) would, like the nonlover, exclude passion from his discourse and would make prudential

policy the desideratum of his utterances. That is this prudential user of language would conscientiously avoid the kind of discourse that...goes beyond persuasion and transports the auditor... (Winterowd 11).

This point is meaningful because of the complaints against Plato which imply that his use of myths and allegories and beautiful language in the Phaedrus show how he values rhetorical devices. Or that he used rhetoric to condemn rhetoric. Here we must again focus on his link between language and morality. I doubt very much that Plato would believe that language can be devoid of suasiveness, so why would he attack persuasion? It is the intent behind the language that is essential here. Is the speaker using persuasion simply to persuade or to teach? Or as I said above, is the speaker creating a reality for his audience or discovering one with them?

If we were to believe that Plato rejected rhetoric, we would have to assume that Plato rejects "every emotive element in the realm of knowledge" (Grassi 28). This seems to lead to the current notion that language should only be "prudential" or poetic without any method of suasiveness. Here it might be interesting to think about the difference in methods between Plato and Aristotle. Academics praise

Aristotle for his rationality, clear explanation, and lack of passion:

Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents (Aristotle Poetics 35).

Plato knowingly approaches his subject imaginatively and with a greater degree of moral and artistic passion:

But the region above the heaven was never worthily sung by the earthly poet, or will it ever be. It is, however, as I shall tell; for I must dare to speak the truth especially as truth is my theme. For the colourless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul (Phaedrus 247c3-7).

Plato's message is clear. "Moral discourse is not necessarily merely prudential discourse. The highest morality frequently demands the discourse of the true lover" (Winterowd 14). Plato's rhetoric then, perhaps, focuses on language as an act, as well as a moral consequence.

### Knowledge and Rhetoric

Before we go on and address the specific criticisms listed earlier regarding Plato, rhetoric, and writing (within the Phaedrus), we need to establish what his basic ideas of knowledge and learning are. I have stated previously that Plato's conception of rhetoric (with suaviseness as a central element) is inextricably bound to his notions of knowledge (with morality as an essential element), and this ideology drives the criticism of rhetoric and writing found in the Phaedrus.

In order to understand Plato's ideas of knowledge and its relationship to rhetoric, it is most helpful to look at the Meno. The definition presented there is one of recollection. Learning is not the grasping of constantly invented ideas, but the recollecting of ideas you already have. Its important to note that Plato is not essentially concerned with final knowledge of the Idea, but, instead, he is concerned with the activity of pursuing knowledge; rhetoric as a process in that pursuit. In the Meno, Socrates reveals to us the inherent

dangers of relying on the knowledge of others as "truth" instead of obtaining self-knowledge through a highly motivated effort to learn. In the Phaedrus, we see the same thing when Socrates finds Phaedrus with Lysias's speech; a speech he wishes to memorize because of Lysias's apparently great words. Because of this reliance on others for truth, Meno is held up to us as a man both ignorant of his self and of the issue of ignorance altogether. He has internalized a method of "thinking" and is unwilling to change. By consistently relying on the opinion of others and not critically questioning the validity of their opinions, he has lost his ability to know what he believes. It is this very ability to question that we see Socrates instilling in Phaedrus; Socrates saves Phaedrus from becoming like Meno.

The Meno begins when Meno asks how virtue is acquired, whether by teaching, by practice, by nature, or by some other means. Socrates responds to Meno's question by calling it into question:

SOC: I share the poverty of my fellow countrymen in this respect and confess to my shame that I have no knowledge about virtue at all. And how can I know a property of something when I do not even know what it is? Do you suppose that somebody entirely ignorant who Meno is

could say whether he is handsome and rich and wellborn or the reverse? Is that possible, do you think?

MEN: No. But is this true about yourself, Socrates, that you don't even know what virtue is?

SOC: Not only that, you may also say that, to the best of my belief, I have never yet met anyone who did know.

MEN: What! Didn't you meet Gorgias when he was here?

SOC: Yes.

MEN: And you still didn't think he knew?

SOC: I'm a forgetful sort of person, and I can't say just now what I thought at the time. ...So remind me, what it was, or tell me yourself if you will. No doubt you agree with him.

MEN: Yes, I do (71b-d2).

Meno's answer to Socrates's first question is an unqualified negative, a quick "no" to a complicated question. Both the quickness and absoluteness with which Meno answers serves to show how meager Meno's grasp of the question is. This answer illustrates how self-evident Meno thinks all questions are--none require analysis or thought. The whole dialogue illustrates that Meno doesn't know how to make a



distinction between what he knows and what he is persuaded to believe.

Further along in the dialogue, we see Meno able to remember the words of others upon which his own opinions are formed. He remembers words representing meaning, but not the actual meaning itself. Here we encounter an important issue: Plato is criticized for having the belief that ideas exist separate and independent of words. However, this distinction between ideas and words is illustrative of his rhetorical ideals. Plato seems to believe that the ideas are more important than the words; however, as I have discussed above, the use of the words is essential for the transfer of the ideas. This concept is illustrated in the Sophist:

STRANGER: Well, thinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound.

THEAT: Certainly.

STRANGER: Whereas the stream which flows from the mind through the lips with sound is called discourse (263e).

However, if the rhetor does not use the words in such a way as to excite and create an active mind, the listener will not get beyond the words.

Obviously, if Plato is concerned solely with ideas, words become arbitrary signifiers to him. What is important is the idea; the language becomes subordinate. One reason for this is the fact that the meaning of words is unfixed.

SOC: When someone utters the word 'iron or 'silver' we all have the same object before our minds haven't we?

PH: Certainly.

SOC: But what about the words 'just' and 'good'? Don't we diverge, and dispute not only with one another but with our own selves?

PH: Yes indeed.

SOC: So in some cases we agree, and in others we don't.

PH: Quite so.

SOC: ...When [a student] comes across a particular word he must realize what it is, and be swift to perceive which of the two kinds the thing he proposes to discuss really belongs to (263-c4).

Socrates goes on to propose that a way to determine the meaning of these unfixed words is through an engaged discussion in order to arrive at a definition. This interrogation of the language enables language to become active. Therefore, a word becomes important only when it becomes "ensouled" with an idea--an active notion--an active occasion. So, when people like Meno or Phaedrus become only involved with the beauty of the language or become caught in the vagueness, they are passive. They become caught up in the persuasive nature of language without understanding or realizing what is being conveyed through the words. The language is working on them with no involvement on their part; this is the danger Plato is concerned about with rhetoric and writing. This is why he makes the essential link between language and knowledge, language and activity, language and learning.

So, Plato's rhetoric "serves to search for truths or probabilities yet to be discovered" (Hikins 171). Platonic rhetoric is a means for discovering knowledge through an active inquiry as opposed to transmitting opinion as was the practice of the sophists. And, this active method for the discovery of knowledge is the dialectic form embodied in the Platonic dialogues.

### Dialectic and the Dialogue

Reading a Platonic dialogue is not like reading a book or any other form of prose. The fact that it is a dialogue should be the first clue; a dialogue requires an active mind and an enormous amount of participation by the reader. In the course of the dialogues, Plato does not provide a doctrine or even a promise of rational discourse (as does Aristotle). What he does do, however, is prepare a way for thought and provide a forum through which something always gets accomplished. But, in order to even slightly grasp the "something" being done or become aware of what is being experienced, the reader must become one of the interlocutors of the dialogue. For if the reader does not take part and actively participate in the development of the conversation, a dialogue has not taken place.

Plato's famous definition of rhetoric as "an art which leads the soul by means of words" mirrors "Gorgias's contention about the effect of the logos on the psyche, and Socrates admits in the Menexenus that the orators 'bewitch our souls'" (Connors 50). Another illustration of Plato's picture of the common response to oratory can be seen in the Phaedrus when Socrates responds to Phaedrus after the latter reads Lysias' speech. Socrates says the speech produced in him a "divine frenzy" (234d).

In order to avoid this bewitching of souls, Plato favors dialectic as the method of learning. And we can see how successful his dialectic is in the dialogues. Plato always sets up a strawman opposite to Socrates who, through the dialectic process, comes to realize his wrongheadedness, or how he has been allowing words to work on him. More often than not, the strawmen's biggest flaw is that they are relying on the words of others as truth (are bewitched by language) and not their own; they are ignorant of their own ignorance (Meno) and, as a result, fail to actively engage their souls and simply accept the opinions of others. This manipulation of words and souls is characteristically attributed to the sophists (Gorgias) and is fiercely condemned by Plato as a detrimental substitute for learning.

So, one answer to the problem (danger) of the manipulation of the "rhetorical spell" (or the experts from rousing a crowd only to soothe "them down again with his spells" Phaedrus 267d) is to prevent it from happening on a basic level. Throughout the dialogues, Socrates tries very hard to control the form of the discourse. What he tries to do, again and again, is "subvert the rhetorical magic" by interrupting it with questions. As Eric Havelock says, dialectic asks a speaker to stop, repeat himself, explain what he meant:

But to say, "What do you mean? Say that again," abruptly disturbed the pleasurable complacency felt in the poetic formula or the image. It meant using different words and these equivalent words fail to be poetic; they would be prosaic. As the question was asked, and the alternative prosaic formula was attempted, the imaginations of speaker and teacher were offended, and the dream so to speak was disrupted, and some unpleasant effort of calculative reflection was substituted. In short, the dialectic... was a weapon for arousing the consciousness from its dream language and stimulating it to think abstractly (quoted in Connors 52).

Therefore, rhetoric, if misused, was interpreted by Plato to be technical manipulation of consciousness. This manipulation was exactly what Socrates accuses the sophists of in the Gorgias. But, by interrupting this trance-like flow of language, the one-way method of rhetoric was eliminated. Or sophistic rhetoric was replaced by Platonic rhetoric.

We can see this interruptive method of question-and-answer in the majority of Plato's dialogues, but especially in the Protagoras and the Gorgias. "A great deal of the struggle in the Protagoras... is between Protagoras's desire to deliver

his opinions in long speeches and Socrates' obdurate refusal to allow him to do it" (Connors 52). In the Gorgias we see Socrates refusing any of his opponents the use of lengthy speeches:

SOC: Would you be willing, Gorgias, to continue our present method of conversing by question and answer, postponing to some other occasion lengthy discourses of the one begun by Polus? You must not, however, disappoint us in your promise but show yourself ready to answer the question briefly.

GOR: There are certain answers, Socrates, that must necessarily be given at length; however, I will attempt to answer as briefly as possible (449b5-c2).

Socrates method throughout the Gorgias is to subvert Gorgias's and Polus's wishes to harangue the assembled people and thus control them, and he accomplishes this subversion by questioning the rhetors and forcing them to think abstractly.

As we know from Plato's other dialogues, especially the Meno, he seems to view knowledge as recollection stimulated by dialectic. He further shows in his dialogues how simply relying on and becoming hypnotized by the rhetoric of Gorgias, Lysias, etc. breeds passivity and ignorance. By relying on

the sophists and politicians for a conception of reality, a person is not forced to take an active role in his learning. As a result, he gives up parts of himself and loses his ability to question.

However, let's not forget what Plato was up against. The spell of beautiful language, sophistic rhetoric, was a powerful one, and "the state of pleasurable receptive passivity that we have been describing was not only accepted, but eagerly sought after" (Connors 51). A good example of this receptive passivity is Phaedrus's response to Lysias's speech in the beginning of the Phaedrus. "Tell me truly, as one friend to another, do you think there is anyone in Greece who could make a finer and more exhaustive speech on the same subject?" (235e). This surrender to pleasure is what Socrates had to fight in the dialogues. Perhaps this is why he not only understood the suaveness of language but the need for it in order to convey his message.

One source of ignorance, then, in the Platonic dialogue is the inability of the strawman to understand the necessity and value of questioning. If we uncritically accept what we are told, remember it, and believe we hold true knowledge, we are deceiving ourselves and those who listen to us. So, learning can only take place when there is activity present on both sides of the conversation: a dialogue, a provocation of the soul, a dialectic.



We can see the importance of engaged discourse in Plato's theory of recollection and we can see the danger in the hypnotic power of one-sided discourse. Without engaged discourse, no learning takes place. So, by mirroring an engaged dialogue in the Phaedrus, he attempts to pull us in and force us to take part in order to recollect.

### Context and Rhetoric

The above three sections, persuasion/morality, knowledge, and dialectic are all considerations alluded to in the Phaedrus. However, the issue of context, is more directly addressed and discussed. In the middle of the Phaedrus, Socrates tell Phaedrus that "...any discourse ought to be constructed like a living creature, with its own body, as it were; it must not lack neither head nor feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to suit each other and the whole work" (264c). And, this living creature must be able to adapt to its context to be effective.

In spoken discourse, it is important for the speech to be truthful, and directly related to the audience. Such a relationship between the speech and the audience is necessary if the speech is to be "written in the soul" of the hearers. In order for this to happen, it is necessary that the speaker know both about the different kinds of souls, and about what kind of speech will be most effective.

It appears, then, that the perfection of speech requires knowledge of the nature of the soul, how it acts and reacts, and even beyond that, the establishing of association between souls and speeches. Or a classification of both souls and speeches and a relating of the two classifications in such a way that it would then be pre-determined what kind of speech relates best to what kind of soul (271a-b).

This knowledge of the soul, however, can only be obtained by an active discourse. We learn about the soul of another by speaking with him. And, we write on his soul through an engaged dialectic. So, how does this apply to written discourse?

Since a written article cannot speak with the soul of its reader, how does written discourse affect the soul? Socrates says that writing makes men neglect their power of memory and fills them with empty conceit of wisdom. The best thing a written work can do is to serve as a reminder for those who know. It is not able to defend itself; nor can it answer questions put upon it. Therefore, written discourse is merely a reminder as it cannot produce writing in the soul.

However, if we read written texts with the awareness that it is not clear Truth, or avoid what Phaedrus does with Lysias's speech, perhaps we are able to invoke some kind of dialogue with the text. But, if this is to be a successful enterprise, we must keep in mind the context of the writer and

try to decipher his soul based on his writing--as I am doing with Plato.

Attempting to invoke a soul of an author is admittedly a more difficult task than relating to the soul of a person who is speaking to you directly. However, if we keep in mind that we have no way of knowing if we are indeed invoking a "correct" image of the author's soul, but still maintain an active inquiry, we may still be able to have a productive experience.

What we will have to remember is that written words are capable of breaking with their contexts, escaping into new contexts and taking on meaning that the writer had no way of intending. If a written text survives long enough, then, readers can make it say anything; this is what Socrates seems to want us to be aware of as we rely on written documents for "knowledge."

Now that I have attempted to provide a brief synopsis of Plato's conception of morality, knowledge, context, and a brief discussion of dialectic, we can move on to investigate the two primary types of discourse Plato discusses as mediums of provocation in the Phaedrus. These types of discourse are speaking and writing.

PHAEDRUSLysias's Speech

In the opening of the Phaedrus Socrates asks Phaedrus "Where do you come from, Phaedrus my friend, and where are you going?" (227). Phaedrus replies in some detail:

PH: I've been with Lysias, Socrates, the son of Cephalus and I'm off for a walk outside the wall, after a long morning's sitting there. On the instructions of our common friend Acumenus I take my walks on the open roads; he tells me that it is more invigorating than walking in the colonnades.

SOC: Yes, he's right in saying so. But Lysias, I take it was in town.

PH: Yes, staying with Epicrates, in the house where Morychus used to live, close to the temple of Olympian Zeus.

SOC: Well, how were you occupied? No doubt Lysias was giving the company a feast of eloquence (227b3).

So, Phaedrus is going outside the city to purge himself of the effects of sitting in the city listening to speeches. He is moving outside of what he knows. This is his expressed intention, which should, however, be contrasted with the

suspicion which Socrates later expresses that actually Phaedrus is going outside the city in order to practice the written speech he has learned and brought with him from the city.

Also, it is important to note that a written speech has lured Socrates out of the city; whereas a spoken one would keep him in. Socrates says:

I am a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. You seem to have discovered a recipe for getting me out (230e1-4).

Phaedrus then reads Lysias' speech. This speech, written in first person, is addressed to a boy by a man who claims not to be his lover. The theme of the speech is that it is better for the boy to grant his favors to a non-lover than to a lover. The speech consists mostly of a disorderly and repetitive listing of various advantages to be gained by the boy if he associates with a non-lover. Much is made of the fact that the lover is lacking in self-control and moderation, that he acts from passion, and his passion is anything but dependable. By contrast, the non-lover is presented as one who does not act out of compulsion but rather according to his view of his own best interest.

As soon as Phaedrus finishes reading Lysias' speech, he asks Socrates opinion about it:

Amazingly fine indeed my friend. I was thrilled by it. And it was you, Phaedrus, that made me feel as I did. I watched your apparent delight in the words as you read. And as I'm sure that you understand such matters better than I do, I took my cue from you, and therefore joined in the ecstasy of my right worshipful companion (234d).

Phaedrus immediately accuses Socrates of making a joke, and he implores Socrates to give his honest judgement of the speech. Socrates now refers to the most general defects of the speech that it is monotonous and repetitive and, thus, has failed in its rhetorical manner.

This first speech serves as an example of "bad" rhetoric. This speech allows Socrates to give us a taste of the more general criticism of current theory and practice that will come in the second half of the dialogue. Phaedrus is, of course, our strawman who needs to realize that he has been consumed with words and not thoughts behind them; he admires the speech for its expression and organization. Socrates concedes that the words are lovely, but the content is poor.

He tells Phaedrus:

Thus, as regards the subject of the speech, do you imagine that anybody could argue that the nonlover should be favored, rather than the lover, without praising the wisdom of the one and censuring the other? That he could dispense with these crucial points then bring up something different. No, no surely we must allow such arguments and forgive the orator for using them, and in that sort of field what merits praise is not invention, but arrangement; but when it comes to nonessential points, that are difficult to invent, we should praise arrangement and invention too (235e6-236a6).

So, here we have a speech that is not either suasive or moral. It is simply pretty. As a result, Socrates's questioning of its value is warranted.

#### Socrates's First Speech

Following his comments on Lysias's speech, Socrates prepares to deliver his first speech. He covers his head in order to adopt a mock anonymity, invokes the muses, and prefaces his speech. According to Socrates' preface, the speaker is a lover who is pretending to be a non-lover and who

is trying to persuade the beloved that it is better to accept a non-lover. So, this speech is presented from the outset as a lie. The intent behind the speech has nothing to do with truth but only with persuading.

Socrates begins his speech by establishing a fictional dramatic setting within which it makes sense to defend the otherwise absurd thesis of Lysias's speech:

Once there was a boy, or rather a youth, who was exceedingly handsome and who had many lovers. Now one of these was quite clever and, though he loved him no less than the others, he had persuaded the boy that he did not love him. And on one occasion when courting him he actually argued that one ought to grant favors to a non-lover rather than to a lover; and this is what he said (237b2-8).

"This dramatic setting serves also to dissociate Socrates from the argument advanced in the speech so that he cannot be accused, as can Lysias, of personally advocating a morally disgraceful thesis" (Sinaiko 31). In fact, although the explicit thesis remains the same, the moral quality of the speech is very different from Lysias's. As Hackforth remarks, "the whole attitude of the speaker, unlike...Lysias's speaker, shows a real concern (for) the (boy's) moral welfare" (40).



Socrates, speaking for the disguised lover, begins the speech by insisting on knowing what love is. The first of the two main parts of the speech is thus devoted to determining what love is and what power it possesses. This element of the speech prepares us for the discussion of the dialectical method in the second half of the dialogue.

In the course of the speech, we find that the definition of love spelled out at the beginning is inappropriate for the kind of love being discussed. In other words, the lover is motivated by a different kind of love than the love he defines. "Thus the simple dramatic setting, which Socrates supplies presumably to give rhetorical coherence to his speech, actually suggests,...that it is not so much the moral content as the dialectical structure of the address that may be wanting" (Sinaiko 32). So, the problem with this first speech of Socrates's, is its structure. The thesis announces a definition and a focus that are not discussed throughout the speech. The definition is not specifically isolated or discussed, instead, Socrates simply tells a story relying solely on pathos and little on logos. This speech has one goal--to persuade at any cost. As a result, it is emotionally effective, but structurally and somewhat morally unsound.

Socrates's first speech is marked by a light, playful quality. By contrast, his second speech seems very serious; in the interlude following his first speech he says he must

present another speech to purge himself of the sin he has committed. The seriousness of purpose extends even to the fictitious speaker who begins the second speech with a flat rejection of his previous argument against love and a strong implication that he is about to tell his beloved the truth. This concern for truth pervades the entire speech, marking it distinctly from the first.

#### Socrates's Second Speech

Socrates rejects outright the thesis shared by the two previous speeches; the non-lover should be favored because he is sane while the lover is mad. In opposition to this thesis, Socrates now asserts that the greatest goods come to us by the means of madness. He then introduces a division of madness, ordinary human madness and god-sent madness. From this division Socrates then proceeds to make a further division of god-sent madness into three kinds: prophesy, purifications and poetic.

This first part of the speech exemplifies what Socrates will describe much later in the dialogue as the method of collection and division (Sallis 133). Although there is no explicit process of collecting, the speech does begin with a collected thesis--madness--and then proceeds to divide it into its kinds. This contrasts with Socrates's first speech where a broad definition was given to guide all other assertions.

So, this third speech not only defines its topic, but divides it specifically into distinct parts. Each part is then discussed and illustrated in such a way that it comes alive through the myth of the charioteer and the horses. The third speech illustrates "an example of persuasive speech such as a philosopher can use" (DeVries 26). By using the myth about the two horses vying for control, Socrates illustrates the two methods used in a persuasive argument. The charioteer uses both negotiation and outright violence to assert himself and maintain both sides of the argument. Perhaps these two actions, negotiation and power, have an analogical relationship between rhetoric and dialectic in the dialogue as a whole. Whereas a rhetorical communication is directed exclusively at the potential audience, and dictated by its psychological variety, the arguments of the dialectician are aimed first at himself, and only second are they shared with one who can be awoken to independence.

This last speech, then, is an illustration of True speech. It contains all of the elements Socrates requires for a speech to be considered an art:

SOC: The conditions [of True speech] to be fulfilled are these. First, you must know the truth about the subject that you speak or write about; that is to say, you

must be able to isolate it in definition, and, having so defined it you must next understand how to divide it into kinds, until you reach the limit of division; secondly, you must have a corresponding discernment of the nature of the soul, discover the type of speech appropriate to each nature, and order and arrange your discourse accordingly... (277b5-c5).

The three speeches provide the matter for the discussion of the legitimacy and the foundation of persuasive speech. The structure of the second half of the Phaedrus is generated by the four principal topics taken up in this part and by the relations between the topics. The topics are: 1. the merits of written speeches in contrast to the spoken word (257b-259d), 2. the connection between speech and knowledge (259e-261a), 3. dialectic in contrast to current rhetoric (261a-269c), and 4. the relation between speech and the soul (269c-279c).

On the surface it appears that the single issue which unifies all that is taken up in the second part of the Phaedrus is that of rhetoric. Certainly it is the case that rhetoric is at issue throughout this part, but, precisely by the way in which it is put at issue, the entire discussion

transcends the consideration of rhetoric regarded as a mere technique of speech-making. The fundamental issue of this part of the dialogue is speaking in relation to these issues of rhetoric in the narrow sense of a technique. For, constructing persuasive speeches appears only as a meager component to what is really demanded of one who would speak in a rhetorical and dialectical manner.

### Speech and Writing

The discussion with which the second part of the dialogue begins is dedicated to posing the question of the perfection of speech. Since this discussion immediately follows the conclusion of Socrates' second speech and since the entire second part of the dialogue is a reflection of the activity practiced in the first part, it is appropriate that Phaedrus begins by drawing a brief comparison between the speeches of the first part. Specifically, he draws out the contrast between the second speech of Socrates and the speech of Lysias; the latter was written. The question Phaedrus now poses is whether there is something unworthy about being a speechwriter.

PH: The fact is that only the other day, my dear good sir, one of our politician was railing at him and reproaching him on this very score,

constantly dubbing him a 'speech writer'; so possibly we shall find him desisting from further composition to preserve his reputation.

SOC: What a ridiculous line to take, young man! And how utterly you misjudge our friend, if you suppose him to be such a timid creature! Am I to believe you really do think that the person you speak of meant his raillery as a reproach?

PH: He gave me that impression, Socrates, and of course you know as well as I do that the men of greatest influence and dignity in political life are reluctant to write speeches and bequeath to posterity compositions of their own, for fear of the verdict of later ages, which might pronounce them sophists (257c-d).

Socrates continues to point out that the politicians who so vocally denounce speech writing are also speech writers themselves.

Thus, the suggestion is that Lysias is not to be reproached merely on the grounds that he is a speech-writer, that, in other words there is nothing intrinsically shameful about this practice.

SOC: Then the conclusion is obvious, that there is nothing shameful in the mere writing of speeches.

PH: Of course.

SOC: But in speaking and writing shamefully and badly instead of as one should, that is where the shame comes in, I take it (258d).

Therefore, the problem is to determine what constitutes speaking and writing done beautifully and what constitutes its opposite.

Presumably, a speech which is truly beautiful is a speech that is in accord with the beautiful itself. To the introduction and initial question regarding the perfection of speech there is appended the little myth of the cicadas. The connection of the myth to what has preceded it lies in the fact that in telling it Socrates is alluding, in a playful manner, to the need man has for beautiful speech. This is especially evident in the "conclusion" which Socrates draws after telling the myth: "Thus there is every reason for us not to yield to slumber in the noontide but to pursue our talk" (259d).

Socrates says that, in pursuing their talk, they would be imitating the cicadas overhead, who are "singing after their wont in the hot sun and conversing with one another" (258e).

According to the myth itself, these cicadas only imitate the men from whom they sprang:

The story is that once upon a time these creatures were men--men of an age before there were any Muses; and that when the latter came into the world and music made its appearance, some of the people of those days were so thrilled with pleasure that they went on singing, and quite forgot to eat and drink until they actually died without noticing it. From them in due course sprang the race of cicadas, to which the Muses have granted the boon of needing no sustenance right from their birth, but of singing from the very first... (259b-c).

Socrates then warns Phaedrus of the need to steer clear of "the bewitching siren song" of the cicadas (259a-b). This danger is related to the fact that the myth refers to music and singing rather than just to speech.

"Then does not a beautiful speech presuppose that the speaker see in thought the truth about the matters of which he is to speak?" (259e). Phaedrus answers with a common objection: An orator speaking in court does not need to know what is really just but only what would seem just. He needs to only know what seems not what is.



Socrates responds to Phaedrus by rejecting orators who are so unknowing that they might try to persuade Phaedrus to buy a horse for military-political purposes while not themselves knowing what a horse is but knowing only that Phaedrus is of the opinion that a horse is an animal which has long ears. Socrates rejects outright the whole prospect of a rhetoric which could claim to be an art while, on the other hand, requiring no knowledge of the content of speeches. Or, he rejects all rhetoric that amounts to nothing but sheer technique. Technique is void of morality and unable to generate the recollection of knowledge.

Socrates steers the discussion towards the themes of dialectic by attempting to justify his claim that rhetoric as sheer technique cannot bring about the perfection of speech. He says that rhetoric has to do with "a kind of leading of the soul by means of logoi" (261a). Socrates demonstrates that knowledge is an indispensable prerequisite to good speech. Unless the speech is being given in accord with the truth, it is misleading and sheer technique. Good speech then, must be driven by knowledge and morality and conveyed in a manner that engages a mind into activity.

After Socrates's investigation into the conditions of good speaking, then, he embarks on a discussion also of good writing. What Socrates says about writing is less clearly an indictment than a warning of potential danger; "he stamps its

packing-case not 'radioactive' but 'volatile'--to be handled with care" (Ferarri 204). The reason he seems to be labeling writing as such is that the rhetoricians expected and taught that writing could provide "something reliable and permanent" (275c6). They didn't realize that writing can only serve to "remind one who knows that which the writing is concerned with" (275c9-d2).

The reason writing only reminds is because it is like a painting, offering only the appearance of living intelligence. And, if you attempt to converse with it, you will discover that it is no more capable of a reply than a person in a portrait, but has only one message which it repeats over and over (275d7-9). What is more, it cannot choose the appropriate audience for its message but delivers it indifferently to those who will and will not understand it. And when it encounters criticism, it has no voice to defend itself but instead "it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself" (275e5).

Socrates continues by saying that the spoken word is more desirable as used in the art of dialectic because the speaker can select his conversational partner, and actively [plant] and [sow] his words founded on knowledge, words which can defend both themselves and him who planted them, words which instead of remaining barren contain a seed whence new words grow up in new characters..." (277a1-5). Here words can both

help themselves and defend their creator rather than require defense from him as well as continually generating new speech rather than saying the same thing over and over. Therefore, "one who is not reliant on the written word for understanding, who has no false expectations of it, and who is able to supplement its inadequacies in speech, may write about what matters to him...and yet merit the title 'philosopher'" (Ferarri 206).

So the Phaedrus offers us a definition of good speech and good writing. Both are driven by a desire to provoke the soul, to implant knowledge in the soul and not to manipulate and deceive. However, speech is more desirable as it is active and present and the speaker can better judge his audience and his environment. Speech is conducive to dialectic and therefore, to active learning. However, Plato does not seem to condemn writing as undesirable. Instead, he seems to be providing some cautions for relying on it as a purveyor of knowledge. Written words are easily accepted at face value as it is impossible to question them. This is a dangerous practice. So, Plato says writing is valuable only if we can recognize its limitations and read with an active mind--engage in a dialogue as best we can.

So, if we look again at the definition of an artful speech, we see that the four sections with which I began this discussion, persuasion/morality, knowledge, dialectic, and context, are all involved. A true speech requires:

1. you know the truth about the subject and attempt to convey the truth (morality and knowledge).
2. you define and divide the subject (dialectic) so that you can easily arrange it to affect (persuade) and engage another's soul (dialectic).
3. discover the type of speech appropriate to each nature (context).

So, a true speech embodies the elements of persuasion, morality, knowledge, dialectic, and context.

In this chapter I have attempted to introduce the Phaedrus and my reading of it as well as to provide a breakdown of the important concepts related to Plato's rhetoric: persuasion/morality, knowledge, dialogue/dialectic and context. In Chapter Two, I will address the criticisms of both Plato's rhetoric and his concepts introduced here.

## CHAPTER TWO

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a survey of critical response to Plato's conception of rhetoric and writing. I will first respond to the charges introduced at the beginning of chapter one, and then I will address three critics individually: Jacques Derrida, Brian Vickers, and Jasper Neel. There are many other critics, however, these three seem to represent the most important and prevalent critiques.

I will also try to bring out the criticisms that deal most specifically with the four concepts discussed in chapter one: persuasion/morality, knowledge, dialectic, and context. The majority of the responses, however, will focus on knowledge and dialectic as these two concepts seem to be the most prevalent in the criticism. Context and persuasion/morality are not attacked as often by the following critics. This may be because Plato's philosophy seems to drive the criticisms leveled at him, and his philosophy produces little discussion of persuasion and context.

### Survey of Criticism

In the beginning of this discussion, I listed four often cited crimes of Plato. I would like to now discuss them in more detail, as well as address a few others.

1. In the act of depreciating rhetoric, Plato shows himself to be a masterful rhetorician (Corbett 538).

Edward Corbett traces the development of rhetoric in classical times in a section of his book, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. After discussing the sophists and the value of Isocrates' teachings he says, "We should look briefly at what Plato (through his spokesman Socrates) had to say about rhetoric, because all the derogatory things that men have said about this art down through the ages have their roots in Plato's strictures" (538). He further argues that Plato's main problem with the rhetoricians was that they were not interested in his conception of transcendental truth, but, instead, "were mere enchanterers of the soul, more interested in dazzling their audience than in instructing it" (539). Corbett ends his discussion of Plato by stating that although Plato does concede the possibility of an art of rhetoric, he does not believe any rhetorician capable of implementing it.

I would like to address his seemingly negative claim that Plato was a rhetorician. Plato was a masterful dramatist. And, within in his dialogues, he has created a character, Socrates, who was a master at speaking. Or as we saw in the previous chapter, had mastered the true art of speech. Let's assume that Plato's Socrates had a mission to make other people aware of how badly they needed to change their behavior, a behavior characterized by passive acceptance. It

is highly likely that Plato knew how difficult it is to show other people that they behave in a improper way without shaming them. Therefore, by using the form of a dialogue, and employing the method of dialectic, he allows the characters to believe that they have discovered for themselves what Socrates already knows. So, yes Plato has a strategy in his dialogues; yes, Plato uses rhetoric in his dialogues; but the important distinction to us, and I believe to Plato, is that the dialogues and Socrates do not profess to offer the Truth. The sophisticated and masterful method Plato has chosen to 'throw something out there' never claims to be something it is not; an important distinction from sophistic rhetoric.

Here it may also be important to say that it is obvious that Plato has an agenda in his dialogues; he knows the outcome. However, this does not diminish the experience for the reader. As I have already discussed, two of the essential elements of the rhetoric in the dialogues are knowledge and dialectic. Since, the experience of reading a dialogue is taxing and requires a great deal of commitment on the part of the reader, it requires a conscious activity. The only way to come to know is to engage in a dialectic of sorts with the text. So, although Plato and the players may know the outcome, the reader does not. And, further, the experience of a dialogue is not ever the same for every reader or even the same reader doing several readings. The ability to draw the reader into an active dialogue is a result of the mastery of Plato's writing.

2. Plato's view of rhetoric assumes that "knowledge of the truth as a precondition of legitimate-or 'real' rhetoric is unreasonable" (Conley 14).

Exactly what Plato is predicating about rhetoric in the Phaedrus is unclear. It is a problem upon which no universal agreement has or will be reached. However, there are some areas of general agreement that drive Conley's response. First, as discussed earlier, the true rhetorician must have knowledge in order to speak well. This is the view to which Thomas Conley objects.

Conley cites the passage in the Phaedrus where Socrates asks Phaedrus whether or not the speaker ought to know the truth about what he is speaking about.

SOC: Then does not a good and successful discourse pre-suppose a knowledge in the mind of the speaker of the truth about his subject?

PH: As to that, dear Socrates, what I have heard is that the intending orator is under no necessity of understanding what is truly just, but only what is likely to be thought just by the body of men who are to give judgement; nor need he know what is truly good or noble, but what will be thought so, since it is on the latter, not the former, that persuasion depends (256e4-260a4).



Conley replies:

The most striking feature of the passage is the opposition between knowledge and opinion. What we have here then is the fundamental issue in the continuing quarrel between Plato and the rhetoricians. It is in terms of this fundamental issue that everything Socrates says about rhetoric in the succeeding Stephanus pages--indeed, in the entire dialogue--must be understood. What we must conclude from this is that, contrary to what has sometimes been asserted about the Phaedrus and the position contribution Plato makes in it to a theory of philosophical rhetoric, Plato has Socrates here set conditions for the rehabilitation of rhetoric which guarantee that it would redeem itself only by an act of self-immolation. Once we have understood that, I would contend, we come to see why any conception of rhetoric harmonious with Plato's ought to be scrupulously avoided (12).

This distinction between opinion and rhetoric directly confronts the concepts of persuasion and morality. Socrates accuses the sophists of manipulating people through rhetoric--this is what he is reacting against in the dialogues. What the sophists were doing was enforcing their opinions on the masses. They were not allowing for alternate views to be expressed through a dialectic; instead, they were casting

their rhetorical spells. This type of persuasion is immoral. Plato on the other hand develops a rhetoric that is concerned with the power of language and how it affects people. By his constant push for definitions and clarification, he forces people into understanding what they think-- actively obtaining knowledge rather than passively accepting opinion. By persuading people to question and seek knowledge, Plato allows them to come to knowledge and know what their opinions mean.

Conley continues his discussion by claiming that Plato never changes his harsh views on rhetoric; in fact, they grow more extreme in the Phaedrus. Conley ends his discussion with a bitter warning that Plato's view of rhetoric is a dangerous one.

Knowledge of the truth as a precondition of legitimate--or real--rhetoric is entirely unreasonable. In the first place, rhetoric arises from real questions and problems about matters of particular fact which need to be acted upon now....It is also a little far-fetched to suggest that there is a way, in medicine, law, and politics alike to deal with present, past, and future questions under the rubric of truth (14).

If Conley were right, Plato would have made the practice of a "reformed rhetoric" impossible. However, I doubt Conley is right. I think Oscar Brownstein has an interesting angle on this dilemma. He argues that Plato never expected the true rhetorician to have true knowledge about everything, but he needed a method for sorting out truth from falsehood; that method is dialectic (395-98).

3. "He upheld the validity of absolutism, thereby scorning the legitimacy of probability and its counterpart opinion" (Golden 17).

Ernesto Grassi states that Plato maintains "... only dialectic enables the rhetor to transcend his limited individual perspective, acquire knowledge rather than opinion..." (234). I think Grassi is correct to say that dialectic allows the rhetor to come closer to knowledge. And, it seems to be Plato's belief that dialectic allows the participants to transcend themselves and come closer to Truth. The concepts of Truth and Ideal Forms is where I begin to have trouble with Plato. However, I still would maintain that there is significant value in Plato's conception of dialectic.

Social Constructionists, among others who believe that knowledge is a social enterprise, criticize Plato on his point of objective reality. And, as a result of this difference of opinion, disregard Plato entirely. It is possible to accept Plato's dialectic without accepting his objective reality.

Obviously Plato realized that coming to 'know' was not a solitary event; he never has a dialogue with one person talking to himself. In the dialogues, Plato most normally sets up a social situation where the players engage in dialectic in order to learn whatever is on Plato's agenda for the day. Plato realizes the importance of conversation among many as a means for realizing truth. If we modify the former statement slightly and say Plato realizes the importance of conversation as a means for constructing a truth, we alter his notion of objective reality, but the notion of dialectic remains the same. Isn't this a social constructionist notion?

Kenneth Bruffee in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" argues for the value of collective thinking and conversation:

To the extent that thought is internalized conversation, then, any effort to understand how we think requires us to understand the nature of conversation; and any effort to understand conversation requires us to understand the nature of community life that generates and maintains conversation. ...To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively--that is, we must learn to converse well (640).

Conversing well requires that the conversants understand how knowledge is established within their communities or a conversation takes place within "a community of knowledgeable peers" (Bruffee 642). "Of knowledgeable peers" is not normally a given in the Platonic dialogues; however, dialectic is still possible because all within the questioning and answering are knowledgeable about something. In the dialogues, usually Plato creates one knowledgeable and moral individual, Socrates, who leads the other naive players through a conversation. It would seem that if all players are knowledgeable in a social constructionist perspective, the only difference is that the process of coming to know would take less time.

Therefore, if we view dialectic as simply an instrument for stimulating active searching for 'knowledge' through language, spoken or written, and not as a means to the knowledge of True forms, it becomes a useful tool for engaged learning of any kind.

4. Plato attacked the art of rhetoric because it represented what he most disliked in Athenian life (Hunt 69).

Did Plato, the man, ever attack anything? How do we know how he felt about Athenian life? What did Plato think? Plato's The Seventh Letter offers us some insight into his philosophy:

This, however, I can say about all those who have written or will write professing to understand those things about which I am in earnest, whether they claim to have learned it from me or from others or to have discovered it for themselves--in my opinion it is not possible for them to have any understanding of this matter at all. Concerning these things which there is not written work of mine, nor will there ever be; for they cannot be expressed in words like other studies, but after much close study of the matter itself and a long companionship with it suddenly, as a fire is kindled from a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and then supports itself (241c-d).

I do not take this statement to mean that Plato never developed a coherent philosophy. Instead, I take it to mean Plato did not write treatises setting forth his views. What he did do is write dialogues. That is to say, Plato himself never speaks directly to his readers. Only his characters speak, and they speak to each other within a dramatic context. Further, "Plato never employs such literary devices as the soliloquy or the chorus, which might be interpreted as statements directed by the author to his audience" (Sinaiko 4). Therefore, nothing said in the dialogues can be directly ascribed as Plato's philosophy because he never speaks as himself. So the opening portion of The Seventh Letter is

revealing; Plato never did commit his own philosophical ideas to writing.

So, if Plato never wrote his philosophy in the dialogues, what are they for? Don't we need a conclusion in order for them to have value? It seems to me that Plato was trying to avoid creating a single speaker with the final say; an explicit conclusion which could be tied to him. Instead, what he seems to be doing is exploring various aspects of a problem and then leaving the reader with them. As a result, the dialogues become dramas of ideas.

I would like to now turn my attention to three primary opponents of Plato and his ideas regarding rhetoric: Jacques Derrida, Brian Vickers, and Jasper Neel.

### Jacques Derrida

In discussing Derrida's attack on Plato, I will be relying on Christopher Norris's Derrida for my analysis.

"Plato's Pharmacy" which appears in Dissemination is Derrida's challenge of Plato's claims about writing; writing as a supplement to speech, with speech 'the better half' as it were, in opposition to writing. According to Plato, says Derrida, writing is "repeating without knowing"--in Derrida's phrase-- a kind of degenerate mnemonics used for rote recollection that cannot recapture the Soul's forgotten memory of the time of union with the True or the Good (Norris 34). Writing, in other words, can only serve as a secondary imitation of speech as a primary imitation of knowledge.

Derrida's point, however, is that writing is not such a mnemonic and that it is no more imitative than speech. Speech and writing, therefore, are mutual efforts to decipher that which is 'other' to language.

The myth which brings up the question of writing in the Phaedrus tells of the Egyptian King Thamus who has a visitor, a god named Theuth, who offers the king the gift of writing. The king decides that man is better off without writing and declines the offer. His reasons are set forth in detail through the King's response:

SOC: But when it came to writing Theuth said, 'Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom.' But the king answered and said, 'O man full of arts, to one it is given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance



no longer from within themselves but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is not true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows (274e3-275b3).

Derrida sees this myth as an issue of authority, an issue that appears to be secondary--marginal--in the original text. According to Christopher Norris, "...Plato mostly treated myths as an inferior kind of cultural production, useful (the best of them) for teaching simple lessons to ignorant minds, but otherwise totally unsuited for the purposes of genuine enlightenment" (32). But, in the Phaedrus Plato seems to rely on this myth as an important piece of writing with an essential message.

Norris claims that Derrida's point regarding the myth is that Plato has Socrates trying to

...convict his opponents of not really knowing what they claim to know; of putting forward various plausible truth-claims without the least

substance of authentic wisdom. The retailers of mythology are guilty of this, because they merely repeat whatever fabulous events come down from tradition or happen to catch the public fancy (32).

Therefore, by repeating the definition of writing through a myth, Plato's credibility and source of knowledge is questioned. So, it seems to me that Derrida's criticism here is that Plato is repeating a myth, something which cannot speak for itself, and relying on it as truth; exactly what Plato criticizes about writing.

When Socrates introduces the myth to Phaedrus, he says, "I can tell you the tradition that has come down from our forefathers, but they alone know the truth of it" (274c), and when he finishes telling the myth he concludes, "For you it makes a difference who the speaker is, and what country he comes from; you don't merely ask whether what he says is true or false" (275c). So, it seems to me that Socrates does call the myth into question, both before and after the telling of it. And, as a result, doesn't use it as a basis of truth, but merely an example that will capture Phaedrus's attention. As we discussed in chapter one, Plato knew the value and the necessity of keeping his audience's attention.

Capturing Phaedrus's attention by using a myth is probably a rhetorical ploy. As I stated earlier, Plato knew the necessity of keeping his readers involved in his writing and persuading them that the struggle to understand his texts

was valuable. Perhaps Plato did consider the myth as an "inferior kind of cultural production, useful...for teaching simple lessons..." (Norris 32), because the myth isn't what ultimately provokes Phaedrus's understanding of Plato's point about writing. In fact, it is the resultant discussion about the ideas presented in the myth that guide Phaedrus to understand.

The resultant discussion, then, is where the value lies. The active, engaged discussion (dialectic) where both Socrates and Phaedrus question and discuss the myth elicits the understanding, the coming closer to knowledge; not the myth alone. I would go one step further and say that Plato would say that writing which elicits discussion and questioning among those who have read it would be valuable as well. It is the writing that is simply accepted at face value which is dangerous.

Another issue Derrida argues against Plato is that he uses "double-logic" throughout his texts. Derrida focuses on the word pharmakon which can mean either poison or cure and is used to refer to writing in Plato's Phaedrus. Norris says, "Writing is both poison and cure, on the one hand a threat to the living presence of authentic (spoken) language, on the other an indispensable means for anyone who wants to record, transmit or somehow commemorate that presence" (37-38). Derrida claims that translators have missed this double meaning and have reduced pharmakon to mean simply poison or cure, not both. As a result, he is suggesting that "what is

really 'on trial' in these efforts to cope with the pharmakon of writing is an ethics of language that has always privileged authentic, self-present speech over the vagaries of textual inscription" (Norris 38).

Derrida continues this argument by claiming that when Phaedrus asks Socrates to define the form of wisdom that is superior to anything acquired from written texts, Socrates replies: 'the sort that goes together with learning and is written in the soul of the learner' (Dissemination 148 in Norris 38). So there becomes 'good' writing, engraved in the soul by wisdom and 'bad' writing that "must always corrupt or pervert such wisdom, since it can only exist in the debased form of inscriptions, material marks, the 'dead letter' or a mere supplement to speech" (Norris 39). However, both distinctions are operating at once in Plato's texts.

Here again, I think that Plato's conception of writing has been oversimplified. Also, Derrida seems to be overlooking the fact that if the Greek word pharmakon does exist in the Greek text, Plato put it there knowing what it meant. As I discussed in chapter one, Socrates addresses the fluctuating nature of language (263-b8) and this double-logic Derrida identifies. He discusses how important it is to know exactly what you are interpreting words to mean before a fruitful conversation can take place.

Perhaps the dual meaning of pharmakon was an intentional ploy. Since Plato does not condemn writing, but offers instead warnings of its use, he sees some kind of value.

Maybe he even sees a poison and cure. Writing is a poison when it is perceived as holding the truth, able to convey knowledge to a passive reader. Writing is a cure when it is read actively, discussed, and contemplated. Plato uses this kind of dual definition also in the Gorgias when he implies that rhetoric can be both cookery and medicine (465c). Since writing remains in effect beyond the life of the author, it can continue to 'speak' infinitely. And since authors cannot control what readers may find in their texts, the ways future readers may interpret those texts remain inexhaustible. However, as long as the texts are being interpreted and not simply absorbed, they have a positive function.

So, it seems to me that Derrida does identify some valid areas of debate within the Phaedrus. However, my interpretation of Plato and his text allows more room for possibilities. Derrida seems to be taking issue with allowing anything--speech or writing--to be related with knowledge. He has an idea that seems to imply nothing means what it seems, and nothing has the authority to claim a tie to knowledge. So, his main disagreement with Plato seems grounded in Plato's philosophy of objective truths to be discovered through dialectic. As I have said above, the notion of objective truths and recollection don't have to erase the value of Plato's dialectic or the validity of his warnings of passive ingestion of material--spoken or written.

Brian Vickers

Brian Vickers's book In Defense of Rhetoric is part polemic and part historical survey. The stated purpose is "to remove the misapprehensions and prejudices that still affect our appreciation of rhetoric" and lead it to being "actively distrusted" and "attacked" (vii). Vickers's effort at rehabilitation derives from what he identifies as the 2,500 year old critique of rhetoric begun by Plato in the Gorgias and mistakenly perpetuated to the present by those who have followed him in decrying rhetoric.

The result, according to Vickers, is that throughout its history as a discipline, rhetoric has been continually fragmented and marginalized, and thus, by implication, its theoretical significance to society has been seriously injured.

Vickers gives the impression that the primary motive for writing a history of rhetoric is the hostility against rhetoric; Plato's hostility. "Plato's hostility to rhetoric is so great, and his misrepresentation of it so extreme, that it is impossible to take his accounts as reliable history or exposition" (15). He argues that Plato, rhetoric's prototypical accuser, is unfair; he is biased; he only tells part of the story, his. In fact, Plato is such an enemy that Vickers devotes the whole of chapter two and a good part of chapter three to a discussion of Plato. He seems to come to two conclusions: Plato wrote good examples of rhetoric and Plato was a totalitarian who wanted to usurp free speech.

Vickers claims that Plato's "own dialogues included both theoretical discussions of eloquence and practical examples, just like self-confessed rhetoric-books" (15). He uses the example that Plato constructed Lysias' speech in the Phaedrus to be inept so he could later have Socrates outshine it with his spoken one. He further claims that Socrates' speeches are "brilliant examples of the rhetorical practice of arguing in utramque partem, on both sides of an issue" (16).

So, is Plato really a hypocrite? Does he hate what he does so well? I doubt it. I have discussed in chapter one that Plato knew the suasive nature of language and was adept at creating persuasive speeches. However, the important distinction between Plato's persuasion and the persuasion offered by the sophists is that Plato realized the moral implications of persuasive language. So, if Plato sets up examples of bad speeches and lets us discover through dialectic why they are bad, there is nothing to criticize. It seems to me that the examples Plato offers in the Phaedrus are intended as just that--examples of different types of speeches. In order for Plato to make his points in the second half of the dialogue, the examples are necessary. Again, the difference between Plato's speeches and the speeches he attacks is the intent behind them. Plato is providing his "brilliant" speeches in order to illustrate to Phaedrus how manipulative they can be; however he is not manipulating Phaedrus. So, if Plato is indeed providing a rhetoric book, as Vickers claims, so be it. However, the dialogues are much

more than mere illustration of technique; they also provide discussion and analysis of the affect discourse has on people. The dialogues raise peoples' consciousness regarding "good" and "bad" or moral and immoral uses of language. This goal seems to be a very noble one.

So, Vickers criticism that Plato is a brilliant rhetor and creates nothing more than textbooks on rhetoric, contains an element of truth. However, as I have discussed above, I don't think Plato's goals were that simple nor does he limit himself to creating a textbook. For Plato does much more in the dialogues than provide speeches for imitation.

The majority of Vickers's chapter two continues with a comparison of what Plato said in his dialogues about rhetoric over a period of thirty years. He tries to show how Plato's hatred for Athenian democracy, especially the use of oratory exercised to influence opinion at public gatherings, drives his criticisms of rhetoric. He portrays Plato as a man living on the fringes of society, who is violent, and who did not want the 'masses' to know anything. Therefore, he used the dialectic form because it "involved individuals, rhetoric approached the masses, and was therefore corrupt" (88). Vickers reduces the dialectic form to a genre of oppression instead of enlightenment.

Vickers claims that dialectic is unnecessary and unfair. By concentrating on a priori truths and virtue through instruction or dialectic, Plato was reserving knowledge for the elite class of philosophers. And, the very fact that a



teacher or Socrates was needed in order for dialectic to be successful created another imbalance, but this time between teacher and student.

So, if we take Vickers's claims to be true, dialectic is nothing more than an elitist method of allowing the few to know while the masses remain in a controllable ignorance. In fact, Vickers goes so far as to say that the Sophists were basically social constructionists: "the citizen (sophists) learn by growing up in a family and community, where mores condemning immorality and impiety as anti-social are passed on from one generation to the next by custom" (122) and "virtue is defined and shared by all citizens; they are open to all" (122). And, finally, in a sophistic interchange "when the debate is conducted properly neither side wins an exclusive victory--unlike Socratic dialectic" (123).

So, Vickers's main problem with dialectic seems to be the power he perceives it to hold. I will agree that Socrates always has the upper hand in the dialogues. However, I don't think that the value of dialectic relies upon one person having all knowledge and others in the conversation having none. As I have said, the value of dialectic is the activity, the questioning, the constant interpretation of what is being said and done. If the power imbalances are there in Plato, OK. But, the imbalances aren't necessarily required for a successful dialogue.

As far as Plato wanting to rule the world and his being elitist, I don't know. I do agree with Vickers's statements that Plato was unhappy with the Athenian government, but I find it hard to believe that a man who seems driven to engage people in active questioning would want to empower them. Questioning very seldom is allowed in a dictatorship. I do believe that Plato did privilege philosophers over the masses, but I don't see how that lessens his ideas or makes them less important. If this kind of thinking were to hold true, we should discount the sophists based on Vickers's privileging of them.

It seems to me, then, that Vickers's main problem with Plato is related to Plato's politics. Vickers seems to interpret everything Plato has done in light of politics and not what I feel was Plato's main concern--self-education. The self-education that requires questions like, "Why do I believe what I believe?" "Are my beliefs true?" And, this latter enterprise seems to me to be especially valuable.

#### Jasper Neel

Neel in his book, Plato, Derrida and Writing, ambitiously attempts "to clear a space in which composition studies can finally be liberated from philosophy" (202), and specifically from Derrida and Plato. Neel's primary purpose seems to be to "save" writing from philosophy by separating the two. And, until this separation takes place, writing will never be considered a legitimate field of study. Therefore,

with this book Neel attempts "to clear a place in intellectual history where the act of writing is neither shameful (as Plato would have it) nor philosophical (as Derrida would have it)" (xiii).

Neel divides his book into two separate discussions: first a deconstructive reading of the Phaedrus and then an analysis of Derridean deconstruction. In the first four chapters, my main concern, Plato is represented as the synonym of bad teaching and bad writing. Neel portrays Plato as seeing writing as a "necessary but unfortunate medium through which we express our inevitably flawed approximation of pre-existing truth" (235). Because of Plato, then, composition teachers are expected to simply discern the difference between what students actually write and what they should be writing--an ideal form. As a result, Neel claims that in order for composition studies to be judged as a legitimate field of study, Plato must be silenced.

Jasper Neel begins chapter one of Plato, Derrida, and Writing with the words "However uncomfortable it may make us, Plato undeniably condemns writing. No amount of interpreting can get around the fact..." (1). Neel bases this claim primarily on the Thamus/Theuth section of the Phaedrus discussed in the Derrida section. For in this section, Neel argues, we will find a writer (Plato) condemning his own medium, and thus, rendering himself totally unreliable. Neel states, "He's [Plato] wrong about writing, and his error is compounded because he is writing to make his case" (5).

Neel interprets the Thamus/Theuth myth to be saying that writing should be damned by all serious students and teachers alike. And, since Plato included it in his dialogue, he also feels writing should be damned. Strangely enough, however, nowhere in the text do I find Socrates making this kind of strong claim. Perhaps it is because there are really no points in the text where this emphatic condemnation takes place. What I do find in Plato's text instead of condemnations are some valid warnings about the reliability of the written word.

If we take a closer look at the myth, we clearly see Plato's caution for us: "If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks" (275a1-6). Plato says that knowledge cannot come from outside the self. Instead, in order to have knowledge we must employ the art of dialectic. "The dialectician selects a soul of the right type, and in it plants and sows his words founded on knowledge, words which can defend both themselves and him who planted them" (276e6-277). Therefore, knowledge cannot come from merely reading another's words, but can only come when those words are full of the life of the speaker who can argue, defend, and plant them in our souls. So, Plato is not saying "writing should be condemned", but he says, instead, that reading should be active.

Instead of damning writing in the Phaedrus, as Neel suggests, Plato issues three primary warnings about relying on writing to convey knowledge on its own:

1. Anything left in writing will not be clear and certain.
2. Students will lose their ability to think and will not be able to gain true knowledge through writing.
3. Students will begin to accept writing as an authority simply because it is written and lose their ability to question.

Jasper Neel confronts all of these warnings in his text, but he considers them indictments against Plato. I will now provide a brief discussion of each warning and Neel's response to them.

Warning 1: Can anyone claim to ever know clearly and certainly what Plato was trying to convey in the dialogues? Even Jasper Neel--who does seem to claim he knows Plato better than Plato himself--says, "In fact, Phaedrus is reducible to an aporia--a set of gaps, dead ends, complexities, and contradictions so entangled as to render the text if not void at least so undecidable as to be disregardable" (5). (Vickers would go with this) I grant that Plato's writing is, at times, undecipherable, even inconsistent in places. But, if Plato is a master illustrator of rhetoric as Brian Vickers

claims, perhaps he was purposely creating an environment where words could not possibly work on the reader. Instead, the reader must work with the words in order to gain some knowledge.

What must happen when a student reads is that she actively engage herself with the text--create a dialogue of her own with the text. As Derrida says, texts are open to interpretation clearly after the author is gone. And, interpretation requires activity, an engaged mind.

Warning 2: As far as students losing their ability to think, Neel offers a prime example of how his students have lost this ability. Neel discusses two experiences he had with separate composition classes. He claims that by asking his students to question their own values and belief systems while writing [he calls this Platonic writing], they couldn't produce what he expected. Their internal securities were in such an upheaval that they could produce nothing but objective texts that only proclaimed themselves as essays and nothing more.

Neel goes on to say that teaching "Platonic" writing does nothing but cause too much cognitive dissonance for the students and, as a result, they don't learn how to communicate (84). I am simplifying his argument, but it is absurd nonetheless. The job of educators asks them to encourage their students to confront themselves directly and ask "Why do I believe this?" No learning can go on without this activity.

We see Plato illustrating a similar student/teacher

problem in the Phaedrus. Phaedrus, at the beginning, accepts Lysias' speech without question. And when Socrates begins forcing Phaedrus to question the beliefs he previously held, he becomes embarrassed. At this point Socrates had two options: quit pressuring Phaedrus and allow him to become like Neel's students or push him to come to grips with his beliefs. The difference between Socrates' student and Neel's becomes obvious when Socrates pushes Phaedrus to learn from the internal questioning--activation of the soul--while Neel allows his students to forego the pain of coming to some sort of resolution with their beliefs.

Warning 3: Last, then, Socrates discusses the authority of the written text, as did Derrida. Since we cannot know clearly and certainly what Plato was trying to convey throughout his dialogues, we obviously cannot say the text is without question. Nor should we ever say a text is without question, for when we do, we become passive and allow language to work on us. We lose the dialectic activity that engages and instructs us. Here again, the example of Lysias and Phaedrus is appropriate. Phaedrus accepts Lysias's speech without question, and, in doing so, gives up his claim to knowledge (recall the Meno). However, through an active question and answer session with Socrates, he is able to see the unreliability of the tangible.

Here, once again, Neel offers what he seems to feel is a critique on the matter of authorial authority. "The text [Phaedrus] is always there for one more interpretation" (19).

If we take interpretation to mean discussion, thinking, questioning, activity, which I do, then Plato has been successful.

As I have shown in this chapter, then, Plato has many opponents. Some of them have valid criticisms and some of them seem to be oversimplifying what I perceive to be Plato's main concerns--dialectic and self-knowledge. Both sides of the debate have arguments that are compelling, so I guess its up to the reader to actively question his/her beliefs and come to understand what they believe on this issue. One thing that both sides illustrate, however, is that Plato has historically been very important to us. He has offered us a unique study on the uses and purpose of language. And, of course a method to come to understand the language.

In the last chapter, I will try to apply my favorite Platonic concept, dialectic, to general pedagogy and writing instruction. Obviously, I feel that there is room for Plato in the modern classroom, despite his perceived flaws.



## CHAPTER THREE

Classical rhetoric influences current writing instruction even though current rhetorical theory has rejected many of its assumptions and pedagogy. This rejection is based on the following definitions:

Classical rhetoric assumes the existence of a knowable world, universally acknowledged truths about the world, and a human mind that learns by memorizing these truths and then applying them formulaically to experience. Modern rhetorical theory, in contrast, assumes that knowledge of the world is provisional and generated collaboratively in discourse (Knoblauch and Brannon, quoted in Bizzell and Herzberg 20).

Although not all contemporary historians of rhetoric agree with Knoblauch and Brannon, it is fair to say that "Classical rhetoric" as defined above is really more of an extension of Plato's philosophy of Ideal Forms and not specifically his rhetorical theory. As we have seen, his rhetorical theory emphasized not only arriving at the Truth, but it placed much greater emphasis on the activity of discourse than on arriving at Truth. So, it seems that those composition teachers who reject Plato on the basis of his attack on rhetoric, may, instead, be rejecting him on the

basis of his philosophy without even bothering to understand the possibilities his definition of True rhetoric offers.

### Platonic Rhetoric

The potential of using Platonic theory as a basis of assignments in composition has not been fully explored because Plato's idea of rhetoric has traditionally been ignored, misunderstood, or unknown. For example, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the conventional twentieth century thought about Plato is that he condemned rhetoric. And, if this were true, why would anyone try to derive useful assignments from a theory which condemns what is being taught? But, remember, Plato did not condemn rhetoric. What he condemned was the rhetoric of the sophists, while at the same time offering an acceptable rhetoric. But if we ignore this True rhetoric, it is easy to pass Plato by, thinking of him as only a critic with little to offer pedagogy.

Plato's rhetoric bypasses categorization (the kind we feel most comfortable with thanks to Aristotle), and instead, relies on the "active interchange of rhetoric and dialectic, between two sides actively engaged in a search" (Welch 100). In Plato's heated attack against sophistic rhetoric in Gorgias, he argues against the prescriptions that the sophistic handbooks relied on. He vehemently expressed his disgust for the absence of intellectual inquiry in some of these handbooks and the teachers who used them. Plato could not envision a genuine rhetoric that did not deal with

activity between the "teacher" and the "student."

Those critics who interpret Plato as completely opposed to rhetoric tend not to consider the existence of the dialogue form in Plato and the fact that it requires active reading. They disregard the readerly resistance that Plato demands in the form of a dialogue, a resistance that assures participation by the reader. The critics emphasize a limited aspect of Plato's conceptualization of rhetoric; they look exclusively at his attack at sophistic rhetoric or his theory of Ideal Forms and ignore his alternative rhetoric and his illustration of dialectic.

#### Dialectic and Dialogue

When discussing Plato and pedagogy with a friend who also teaches composition, I learned that she sees a separation between the concept of dialectic from the activity of dialogue in the classroom. I found this interesting, as I consider them part and parcel of the same thing: an active interchange towards the pursuit of knowledge. Her distinctions were as follows:

1. Dialectic: an activity where the teacher knows the answers and leads the students to them.
2. Dialogue: an activity where neither the teacher or the students know the answers and they arrive at answers together.

These distinctions led me to seek other definitions. What I found, essentially, was that most contemporary scholars of rhetoric want to reject the idea of the teacher leading the students to truth; an activity they associate with Plato. Thus, dialectic becomes a marked term and dialogue or conversation takes its place in contemporary usage.

What seems to really be at issue here is not the definition of dialectic or dialogue, but where the emphasis should be placed: process or product. If we accept the activity of dialectic to be one where the teacher leads the students to Truth, then the emphasis is on the end results; what the student knows at the end of the discussion. However, if we view dialectic as an active pursuit of knowledge with engaged conversation between the teacher and student, the process becomes the focus. As teachers, we seem more concerned with what the student can re-tell or re-write at the end of the class than we are with how the student comes to his answers.

What I would like to do now is discuss the ramifications of accepting the traditional definition of Plato's dialectic, focus on what the student can re-tell, and then discuss the ramifications of my revised definition of Platonic dialectic (i.e. how a student comes to know) which we have seen in chapters one and two. I will look at both conceptions of dialectic from, first, the teacher and then the student's perspective.

After the discussion of dialectic and general pedagogy, I would like to address writing instruction in particular. I will address how the concepts discussed in chapter one-- context, morality/persuasion, and knowledge--as elements of dialectical rhetoric in a composition classroom.

### Teacher and "Classical" Dialectic

If a teacher were trained to use a method of dialectic to lead a student to Truth in her classroom, she would be working with several assumptions. First, if she is leading students to Truth, there is a Truth to be found. Second, the teacher knows the Truth and can convey it to her students. Both of these assumptions seem to point to one issue: power and control. Where is the power in the classroom under this approach? The power rests solely with the teacher since it is her job to convey Truth to her students so that they can re-tell it back to her.

Students are trained to believe what their teachers tell them; teachers possess the Truth. So, leading them to "correct" answers is a matter of the teacher deciding what is correct and enforcing it in her classroom. If we decide that there is no Truth or that truth is socially constructed, power is removed from the teacher and given to the students; a premise that seems to frighten many teachers. Power is a difficult thing to relinquish.

Students and "Classical" Dialectic

If we look at this absolutist end for dialectic from the perspective of the student, power, again, seems to be the dominant issue. As I have stated above, students are used to accepting at face value what is told to them; students are not taught to think on their own. If the teacher is perceived as having all the answers, the students perceive their roles as empty vessels awaiting to be filled with the Truth. If the teacher is employing "classical" dialectic, she will be forcing the students to participate, but she will have the power and the answers. So, even though she is enforcing a question/answer session in her classroom, she has the control to guide and mold the conversation in the direction she desires; the students know this.

Anyone who has ever tried to maintain a question/answer session with an introductory course of any kind will find herself running into a brick wall. Since students believe that there is a Right answer to any question a teacher asks, they are reticent to answer for fear of being wrong or embarrassed. I have seen new teachers in both secondary and college courses attempt to lead their students to the desired answers through question/answer sessions who succeed at nothing more than terrifying and alienating their students. All for one simple reason, they are more concerned with getting the Right answers "out there" before the end of class (product) and controlling the answers of their students in the process. I remember one case in a high school very vividly.

I was observing a student teacher in a high school who was told that he needed to engage the students in a question/answer session more often (rather than lecturing all of the time) in order to force the students to think about what they had read. The new teacher was, first of all, angry because he had prepared a lecture and didn't want to "waste time" fishing for answers and, second, so convinced that his interpretation of the book, The Catcher in the Rye was so good that all should hear it. Besides, it would be on the test. The conversation in the classroom went something like this:

Teacher: What was the message in the book?  
{silence}

Teacher: Come on, you guys, did you read it? We have a lot to cover today.  
{nods}

Teacher: Well, then, what was the theme?

Student 1: Psychological problems?

Teacher: Not really. Anyone else?

Student 2: Growing up?

Teacher: Close. We've got a lot to cover, so I'll get us started. It was about a rebellion against normative values.  
{teacher begins to lecture and students begin to take notes}.

Teacher: Ok, what about Holden? What are we to make of him?

Student 3: He was a basket case!

Teacher: How did his psychological problems  
relate to the theme of rebellion?

Student 2: He went nuts to rebel?

The teacher began to lecture again at this point and simply had the students copy notes from the blackboard for the rest of the hour. He then gave them a prepared quiz over their discussion.

This example shows how the teacher, when presented with the "wrong" answers, limited his students confidence to respond. Also, he simply told them the answers when he had become exasperated, not wanting to "waste time" allowing them to figure things out. The last thing this case illustrates is that the teacher took the liberty of manipulating student's answers to fit his interpretation (student 3 and teacher). By forcing these connections, the student's process in forming an interpretation is further limited. The students finally quit trying when their answers became foreign to them and the teacher's answers dominated.

The whole concept of giving students a pre-prepared quiz at the end of each class, enforces the fact that the teacher has an agenda that must be followed in order to do well in the class. He did this every class, so the students knew what to expect.



This particular teacher was very formal and gruff with his students which may have added to their fear to respond to his questions. However, his use of the question/answer session seemed to be so overwhelmingly weighted to the fact that he did in fact hold the correct and true answers that the students knew the questions were simply avenues for the teacher to express himself; there was never any room for an alternative interpretation.

This particular classroom where the teacher felt he was employing a "dialectical method" of teaching, did nothing but enforce a severe power distinction and focus on product, what could be re-told on a test. This seems to be a common mode of teaching in both high schools and college classes.

Perhaps the fact that this particular teacher felt he did have the answers, Truth, to convey and that his students weren't ever going to understand without his simply telling them the answers doomed his use of "dialectic." However, it also reveals that there is a certain skill involved in asking the questions in order to engage the students, as well as a skill in allowing the students a certain amount of freedom to discover how and why they think particular things.

So, "classical" dialectic can be very detrimental to students. It can enforce a kind of passivity or quest for pleasing the teacher and not the quest for knowledge. The power problem further comes into play when the teacher begins to use "dialectic" merely as a power game with the students instead as a method for conveying and discovering knowledge.

I don't know one student who has never had an instructor who expected her to play games in the classroom. By "play games" I mean answer or respond to the teacher's questions in the way the teacher expected; learn the teacher's agenda and play according to the rules of the class. Again, I have had an instructor who ran her classroom in this manner. This class was a graduate literature class on women's literature. It was not billed as a feminist theory class or a feminist perspective class; however, we all learned rather quickly that we must adopt a feminist stance if we wanted to pass the class.

Teacher: What was the underlying theme in Frankenstein?

Student 1: The battle between good and evil?

Teacher: Well, okay, maybe, but what was the important theme?

Student 2: The birth myth. Or how Victor envied women's ability to give birth but he was not a nurturing parent.....

Teacher: YES.

Student 1: Well, the birth myth seems important, but I didn't view it as the dominant theme. The focus seemed more on the duality of nature, to me anyway.

Teacher: Well, it is a theme, but your being a bit ambitious for the scope of this class.

Well, needless to say, Student 1 quit making comments. In this case, student 2 played all of the instructor's games in class. She knew what to say and how to say it in order to get a favorable response. We soon figured out that every question the teacher asked had an answer that dealt with the oppression of women. If you phrased your answer so that it dealt with that one specific theme, you arrived at a Truth. If not, you were dismissed or considered to be on the "wrong track."

This "classical" dialectic reminds me more of a representation of sophistic rhetoric. Sophistic rhetoric, speeches by Gorgias or by teachers, was capable of persuading its audience that knowledge was being conveyed through the rhetor's words. As a result, those listening would memorize what was being said and simply accept it as truth. This kind of blind belief in what the teacher says stagnates, and finally, hampers the ability to actively learn. This kind of discourse does not require thought or effort; it does not inspire learning.

So, the main problem with the "classical" rhetoric I have been discussing is related to power and to product. If we are to enforce a dialectic that serves to eventually stifle or manipulate students into playing into the teacher's agenda, we are definitely violating Plato's view of dialectic. We are not enforcing engagement, but conformity.

I realize that both cases I have used here to illustrate the abuse of dialectic are taken from literature classes. This was not intentional. Important distinction? I'm not sure.

So, if we disregard "classical" dialectic then, and move on to my modified definition, process-centered activity, are power and product still problems? Yes.

### Teacher and Dialectic

Life would be all well and good if we could buy into certain philosophies that proclaim the death of all authority and control. Well and good until we needed to get something done, that is. So, even if we modify the classical definition of dialectic to be more egalitarian, the teacher must still possess some kind of control.

The constraints of academia force teachers to assume certain responsibilities, be that good or bad, and some of these include, evaluation, transference of certain information, and following certain rules. In order for these things to get done, teachers must assume some power in the classroom. However, this power does not have to be so all encompassing that the students are relegated to simple underlings.

If we view dialectic as an active interchange between students and teachers in order to arrive at answers and not Truth, then the biggest power problem is abolished. However, we cannot be so idealistic as my friend in her definition of dialogue, teachers and students learning together, because teachers do know subject-specific material that the students do not; that is why the students are in the class. However, the teacher does not know everything about everything and it

is in both her best interest and the students to accept that fact.

Once teachers relinquish some control and lose some fear of admitting that they are not possessors of all knowledge, dialectic, engaged learning, can occur. It would also be naive to state that although teachers normally know more than their students, that they never learn from them. However, this seems to be a contention of the "classical" dialectic method. So, what is the value of this open forum of discourse?

One of the major problems I have encountered in my classroom is trying to instill confidence in my students. As I have discussed above, students are used to being told what is True and are not used to being forced to come to grips with what they think (know?) and why. And, since the major focus of my classroom is to create a forum for many questions and answers, I force my students into an uncomfortable position of questioning themselves as well as me.

I have found that my students find questioning themselves even more difficult than questioning me. Once we have established a confident classroom where they feel comfortable questioning and answering, no power plays, no preconceived Truths, I try to stop doing the questioning of my students and force/encourage them to take over the role of questioner. By doing this not only do I relinquish my role as the center of the classroom, but I also relinquish the control of where the conversation will go; what information gets out.

When a teacher enters a classroom, most likely she has a certain agenda in mind. She can choose to enforce that agenda at all costs or she can follow the students' lead and take the time see how their agendas arrive out of class material.

Is this re-definition of dialectic still Platonic? Yes, in several ways. First, the idea of Truth is simply shifted to a more socially constructed definition. By engaging in discussions with our students, engaging their minds in an active search for answers, we are searching for answers that we can support with our knowledge. Since we cannot know Truth and we cannot realistically search for its existence, we must shift our emphasis to truth. However the importance lies in the activity of the search and not entirely in the end product.

Second, this view of dialectic also supports the notion of recollection--recollecting what we have learned. Again, our definition of recollection is not tied to Truth but to understanding. By using the question/answer format we are forcing students to question what they realize they know as well as discover how much they know. This type of recollection instills confidence in students.

Third, although the teacher does not always play the role of Socrates, someone does. There is always a questioner and a group of responders. The emphasis simply shifts from one person to many. The catch for the teacher comes to be the ability to teach how to question effectively.

### Students and Dialectic

Dialectic benefits the student in many ways, although they may not realize it right away. Forcing students to question themselves, their belief systems and values, results in shaking up their internal securities. Creating inner turmoil in students makes them uncomfortable.

By forcing the students to question, we force them to take control of their educations. They can no longer simply play the part of a passive receptacle. Instead, they are forced to take charge of their learning process; they cannot rely on the teacher for the Right answers. This is a difficult concept for students to grasp and takes time to develop. However, once they take charge of their learning, they will see how much more effective it is, as well as fulfilling.

### Dialectical Rhetoric and Writing Instruction

Once students come to grips with what they think and why, then they need a medium to express what they have found. They need to effectively transform their ideas into writing. Plato recognized that one or more primary ideas underlie what we choose to say, and when these ideas are not clearly understood, we are in trouble. A transformed, enhanced, clarified understanding of our ideas must be the basis for our writing. Plato offers us, in the Phaedrus, a clear discussion of how to construct a clear argument in order to avoid misunderstandings with our audience.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, Plato found the use of definitions extremely important for clarity. A definition should be as free of unclear words as possible (Phaedrus 263-264). And when one can arrive at this clear definition, presumably through dialectic, he has a thesis, a clear starting point for his argument. In the Phaedrus, Lysias's speech is offered to us an example of a speech that does not provide a clear definition or follow a cogent organization to support the definition:

SOC: ...Did Lysias at the beginning of his discourse on love compel us to conceive of it as a certain definite entity, with a meaning he had himself decided upon? And did he proceed to bring all his subsequent remarks, from first to last, into line with that meaning? ... No, he doesn't seem to get anywhere near what we are looking for; he goes about it like a man swimming on his back, in reverse, and starts from the end instead of the beginning; his opening words are what the lover would naturally say to his boy only when he had finished... (263d-264).

Socrates then provides the structure for an effective speech, "A speech must begin with a preamble and next comes exposition accompanied by direct evidence; thirdly, indirect evidence; fourthly probabilities; besides which there are the proof and



supplementary proof..." (266e-267). Although, Socrates offers a definite structure for organizing discourse, he does not stop there. We see at the beginning of the Phaedrus Phaedrus believing that Lysias's speech is a great example of a persuasive speech. If Socrates would not have raised all of the questions about its structure and content, Phaedrus would have memorized Lysias's speech and used it for a model for all his speeches. Through their analysis, Phaedrus and Socrates come to know why the speech is structurally bad, as well as determining the manipulative nature of the language. So, although Plato realizes that structure is important to the logic of an argument, he also realizes that rhetoric is more than structure or technique as he illustrates through his two speeches. If we were to teach our students nothing but how to imitate structure we would be teaching them skills--not dialectical rhetoric.

According to Kathleen Welch, composition studies seem to be relying on a sophistic rhetoric or a teaching of imitative techniques, and composition and rhetoric studies have forgotten their functions as faculties. As a result, "rhetoric and composition without their vital functions as faculties ultimately become trivial and boring" (94). They do not force the students into any kind of active inquiry through their writing. Students should view dialectical rhetoric as a bridge between structure and knowledge. Their writing is the method by which they come to grips with what they know, what they want to say, and how they want to say it.

Plato's rhetoric does just these things as it "relies ... on the active interchange of rhetoric and dialectic between two sides actively engaged in a search" (Welch 100). By simply telling a student "how to" write (if this is possible) and giving her a handbook, we fail to engage the writer in any meaningful conversation. This type of instruction will "deny activity between the message sender and the receiver, and therefore [allow] the soul to atrophy" (Welch 100).

Welch goes on to say that almost all freshman writing books emphasize a static, rule-centered, passive rhetoric--a technical rhetoric which requires very little thought or interaction from the students. These books, in effect, then stimulate or engage very little of the student. Students become Menos who can't distinguish between themselves and the world in which they are writing. All they are being asked to do is memorize and repeat, either verbally or written, what they have "learned." As we have seen from our discussion in the above chapters, memorizing other people's ideas or accepting what is in a textbook as the Truth is counter-productive to any sort of knowledge acquisition.

#### Changes in the Classroom

What we need to do in composition instruction is move from skill-bound, static rhetoric to a discourse which reunites rhetoric with thinking, asking, and interaction-- a marriage between rhetoric and dialectic, form and human activity. The teaching of rhetoric and dialectic is "a call

to mutual activity that obliterates the familiar passiveness of the classroom" (Welch 110). So, how can we do this?

### Dialectical Rhetoric and Structure

First of all, I don't think we can totally eliminate the teaching of techniques and skills in composition classrooms. However, our teaching of these things can change. In the majority of composition classes, grammar, spelling, and other prescriptive elements of writing are taught directly from a textbook through quizzes, lectures, workbooks, etc.--passive instruction. By teaching in this way, the students memorize but they don't understand why the rules are important or the impact they have in one's writing. Therefore, the rules mean nothing to them. One way to avoid this kind of passive instruction may be to discuss the prescriptive rules and their value, or engage our students in a dialogue about the function and purpose of rules and structure. Maybe the rule books aren't above question?

By engaging in a discussion about the boring elements of grammar, punctuation, etc., students may begin to understand why the rules are there or what would happen without them. By having these kinds of discussion in the classrooms, looking at examples, and truly questioning rules, students and teachers would both gain a deeper understanding of the value of prescriptive elements in writing. Also, by allowing students to question "authorities", they gain more confidence in the rules and their own abilities to ask and answer questions.

### Dialectical Rhetoric and Context

Dialectical rhetoric also offers better insight into audience analysis. If we require our composition students to engage in a discussion with their readers, instead of simply putting information out there, they are forced to engage themselves at a deeper level. "Dialectical rhetoric must partake of the mutuality that speakers and writers necessarily have with their audiences. The mutuality requires that the audience become an encoder as well" (Welch 110).

By forcing our students to engage in a conversation with an audience, they will be required to look at whole human beings as readers of their prose. An audience will no longer be reduced to an unreal set of invisible readers there to be manipulated.

As we discussed in chapter one, knowing how to match discourse with souls is an essential element of effective communication. And, knowing a soul is a very difficult task. Anyone who has ever tried to do audience analysis exercises in the classroom knows how difficult it is for students to envision anyone but themselves or the teacher as a reader of their document, and it is even more difficult for students to realize the different backgrounds behind people, texts and how these backgrounds affect discourse. However, maybe the essential problem is that composition classrooms are more concerned with producing writing than forcing the students to really get to know an audience and the expectations that should guide their writing. How much stress is really placed

on entering a dialogue with a community? The dialogue is most normally expected to go on between the student and the teacher.

#### Dialectical Rhetoric and Persuasion/Morality

The interactive requirements of dialectical rhetoric would help students become more aware of the affect their writing has on people. It is always important to make our students aware of the power of language and how it can be used to manipulate people (sophistic rhetoric). In my classroom we discuss the morality of advertising and try to envision who would be affected by what kinds of ads. We try to understand the motivation of ad agencies when they use manipulative writing to influence people.

Dialectical rhetoric, by requiring the students to engage and in a sense know their audiences, places a greater degree of responsibility on them to be moral in their persuasive essays. It is easier to manipulate people you don't know. By placing a moral responsibility on our students and making them aware of the affect their writing has on people, they gain a greater insight into the power of language and the need to use it in an ethical manner.

#### Dialectical Rhetoric and Knowledge

As I have said in the beginning of this chapter, students have a difficult time questioning. Instead, they rely on someone to give them knowledge. Dialectical rhetoric forces

them to not only question but answer and be responsible for what they say. We need to help our students view dialectical rhetoric as a faculty to help them use both technique and knowledge in their writing. In this manner, dialectical rhetoric becomes the tertium quid in the classroom. The essential bridge to cross from technique to knowing.

The most valuable gift we can give to our students is the ability to ask questions. For asking questions gives students the power to look at things in many different ways, to weigh the interpretations, to discover what they know. Dialectical Rhetoric allows them a method and a medium in which to ask and discover.

Regardless of all the criticisms leveled at Plato, he is still an extremely valuable force in our classrooms. He has given us a method of inquiry that is empowering and effective. He has, through the Phaedrus, shown us both the beauty and the danger of language and has provided us with the tool to understand and come to know.

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