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## What Difference a Definition Makes, or, William Dean Howells and the Sophist's Shoes

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Starting from a chance quotation in William Dean Howells' "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading," this essay reflects on the differences (and relations) between what classical tradition would call "grammatical" and "rhetorical" approaches to discourse — and, likewise, what might be called "hermeneutic" and "productive" approaches to rhetoric. The grammatical/hermeneutic approach is oriented towards reaching an understanding of what a text says or means, or what its argument is, while the rhetorical/productive approach is characterized by the questions, *How was it done?* and *How can I do that?* It is this latter approach — the orientation toward the cultivation of productive discursive skill — that disciplinarily makes rhetoric, as opposed to a variety of philosophy or literary criticism. This notion is further aligned, on one hand, with a revisionist "sophist's history of rhetoric," and, on the other hand, with a "sophistic" approach to rhetorical education derived from the tradition of Isocrates.

Nearly forty years ago, when I was a callow youth and an English major and the canon was mostly dead white males, one of the canonic texts was an essay titled "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading," by William Dean Howells, the "dean of American letters" at the end of the nineteenth century. The essay, originally a lecture delivered somewhere in the Midwest in 1899 (when Howells was 62 years old), basically is a manifesto for realism, larded with genteel turn-of-the-century talk about truth, beauty, art, and the sins of romanticism. I have little interest in it now, for the most part. But a couple of

lines—near the beginning, before Howells has really entered his theme—have stuck with me all these years:

The reader who is not an author considers what the book is; the author who is a reader, considers, will he, nil he, how the book has been done (Howells 216).

Along with this goes some other stuff about the “chasmal difference between the author and the reader, which Goethe says can never be bridged,” and a reflection that “others” who are not authors “may learn to enjoy, to reason and to infer” about a work of literature, but only a fellow-author can appreciate and have insight into the writer’s craft.

This snippet from Howells may seem an inauspicious place to start a discussion of “revisionist classical rhetorics.” But I return to it now for two main reasons: first, it has stayed with me, and has something to do with the interests that turned me to rhetoric originally, and that still sustain me; and, second, I now can recognize it—as I could not, at the first encounter—as a late, flickering expression of the classical rhetorical curriculum, which, by 1899, had nearly died out in American higher education. (Whether Howells is channeling something from his limited formal education, or from some other source in his voracious reading, or his personal experience, I leave for you to guess or find out). In essence, what this snippet expresses is the fundamental distinction in the classical curriculum between grammatical and rhetorical approaches to literature, or to discursive art in general. In the grammatical curriculum, one asks “what the [text] is”—is it a poem? a political pamphlet? an example of romanticism? fine art or lowbrow kitsch? an instance of truth and beauty?—and one may appreciate its quality and “reason and infer” about what it means, implies, argues, signifies, suggests, and so forth, with the goal of producing a defensible *reading*, or an aesthetic judgment. In the rhetorical curriculum, one asks, *How was it done?*, or more to the point, *How can I do that?*, with the goal of acquiring a productive, performative capacity. The first is a readerly perspective; the second is writerly, or speakerly. Of course the two depend on each other, at least in principle: one cannot take a rhetorical perspective without at least a basic, grammatical understanding of a text; and the grammatical perspective, with an eye to rhetoric, can frame itself as “rhetorical hermeneutics,” and can stage rhetorical performances in the form of interpretive debates. But there is, nonetheless, a fundamental distinction between the two.

About which more presently. But first a narrative:

### Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity

My own “revisionist” account of “classical rhetoric,” in *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, began as a response to two familiar lines of thought: on one hand, a persistent tendency in modern histories of rhetoric to identify “rhetoric” primarily with practical civic discourse while regarding most epideictic and literary forms of rhetoric as secondary, derivative, aestheticized, or even decadent manifestations of the art; on the other hand, an equally persistent tendency in modern literary-critical studies to reduce rhetoric to figurality, or to various formalisms, while occluding the argumentative, suasive, and civic character of poetic or literary discourse. This latter view, while clean and uninformed, also coincides surprisingly with modern rhetoric’s limited view of epideictic. This fact itself is an artifact of history. When teachers of rhetoric seceded from English and formed their own disciplines in the early decades of the twentieth century, they took a fundamentally Aristotelian view of rhetoric as practical civic discourse—this is what sets it apart, for Aristotle, as a distinct disciplinary object from dialectic, and perhaps from other discourse arts as well (including poetry). Moreover, as they seceded, those rhetoricians preserved a distinction inherited from English between practical and aesthetic discourse, but reversed the valuation: what English slighted as beneath its high aesthetic consideration, rhetoric would embrace as having superior civic virtue, while bringing to its chosen object more or less the same philological and analytic tools employed in English, Classic Philology, History, and other humanistic disciplines. Rhetoric then began, as a twentieth-century academic discipline, as what Herbert Wichelns famously called in 1925 “the literary criticism of [practical civic] oratory,” or of “rhetorical” texts—as opposed to “literary” or “merely aesthetic” ones.

My contrarian response to these lines of thought was to adopt a view, derived from Chaim Perelman, Kenneth Burke, and certain other ancient authorities—particularly Isocrates and Hermogenes—which epideictic discourse, construed broadly, is the primary or “central” form of rhetoric, which establishes and embodies the paradigm of belief, value, and eloquence that practical rhetoric draws on. (See particular Perelman, *New* 47–51, *Realm* 19–20, and “Rhetoric” 129–134; Burke, *Rhetoric* 167–176; and Hermogenes 2.10/384–399, 2.12/403–413. For a related argument, see Edelman.) Starting from this position, then, I tried to sketch what I called a “sophist’s history of rhetoric,” in which the traditional story of practical civic rhetoric

rising and falling with the fortunes of democracy gives way to an account of rhetoric adapting to the particular circumstances of its moment in history—so that, for example, the “Second Sophistic” no longer appears as a period of decadence, but as the flowering of an Isocratean ideal such as we find affirmed in Cicero’s *De Oratore*, or (later) in Aelius Aristides’ *Against Plato in Defense of Rhetoric*.

In addition, I tried to sketch a “rhetorical poetics” embodied in archaic Greek lyric—a primal form of epideictic rhetoric, indeed of enthymematic argument in song, operating as a live tradition before the development of any systematic theory of rhetoric or poetics, in what George Kennedy has called the “traditional” or “preconceptual” period of Greek language practices (see Kennedy ch. 1). Finally, I argued that the grammatical tradition in antiquity evolved an approach to poetry and other literary discourse that tended to occlude its rhetorical character as a suasive transaction, while foregrounding its character as an object for hermeneutic analysis in the classroom—where the student’s job was not to be persuaded or not (or to respond or reply), but to correctly identify and appreciate the poem’s formal qualities, and to correctly “get” its meaning, especially its “hidden” meanings, or what the Greek tradition called *huponoias* (*huponoia*, “under-thought”) or allegories of philosophical ideas (*allegoria*). This ancient grammatical tradition, especially as it developed in late antiquity (see Irvine), is the root of the scriptural-hermeneutic methods Augustine lays out in the first three books of *De Doctrina Christiana*, and the root also of most modern approaches to literature—specifically, of the “readerly” approach to literature that Howells’ two-liner points to.

In antiquity as in Howells’ day and now, the ability to play this schoolroom game, to interpret and appreciate correctly according to the standards of canonic or esteemed authorities, was and is a form of cultural capital, a key to social status, insofar as it marks a person as educated and thus qualified for an elite position in society, or at least as “intellectual”: according to the Neoplatonists, the *Odyssey* is an allegory of the soul’s journey of return to unity with the One; let me tell you about my poststructuralist reading of Don Delillo. In sum, what we call “literature” (or “high” literature in particular) came to be identified with the activities of the grammatical curriculum, while its status as a rhetorical transaction tended to be obscured. That is: it came to be thought of as a *representation* to be *understood* and *appreciated*, or an aesthetic object, as opposed to an *argument* to be *assessed* and *responded to*. And thus we come, in the modern period, to the bifurcated views of “literature” and “rhetoric,” or of epideictic and practical civic rhetoric, that I began with.

So that, in simplified form, is the tale that I have told. And now for the question this symposium has posed: So what? What difference does it make?

### So What

I am tempted to say: *Damned if I know*. I might say that I wrote it as a “sophist’s history of rhetoric,” as provocation, as anillogy: a rhetorical sally, an effort to make the lesser case greater, awaiting a reply. So in some fundamental sense, what difference it makes (if any) is up to you, and is not for me to decide.

But that’s cheating. Suppose my argument is right, at least part way. (I think it is.) What then? First of all, as I have said, the history of rhetoric looks different. A history of anything is largely an illustration of its definition: if you change the definition its exemplars change, and the story they constitute will change as well. In my story the cast of characters is more or less the same, but the emphases shift. The central “classical” tradition runs not from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* or from Plato, but from Isocrates (and the earlier sophists to whom he stands as a culmination); and it then runs through such figures as Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Hermogenes, or “Longinus” *On the Sublime*, or such Second Sophistic worthies as Aelius Aristides, Libanius, Maximus of Tyre, Dio Chrysostom, or Apuleius, writers from whom we still have very substantial bodies of surviving work, and pretty much all of it available in more or less reliable translations, just waiting for a generation of rhetoricians and historians of rhetoric to take it seriously. And this is only a partial list. I do not mean to suggest that all these figures (and others that might be named) must constitute a single coherent entity; I mean that in a “sophist’s history of rhetoric” they take on more significance, and more centrality.

But if we take a sophist’s definition of rhetoric, and construct from it a sophist’s history of rhetoric, and say that epideictic is central to the “realm of rhetoric” and that the central tradition in antiquity runs from (or through) Isocrates, what difference does *that* make?

Consider, first, what we might move away from, or displace—not reject, just displace or move away from. In the Aristotelian conception that first gave modern rhetoric its twentieth-century disciplinary identity, rhetoric is a “counterpart of dialectic,” a special mode of dialectical reasoning that applies to the contingencies of practical civic discourse in particular situations, and that necessarily takes account of probabilities, human emotions, and the effects of arrangement, style, and delivery. Fine. This in itself makes what Aristotle calls

“rhetoric” an applied version of what the sophistic tradition would call epideictic (because, i.e., he is viewing rhetoric as a sort of applied version of “philosophy” as he understands it). But consider more closely his famous definition:

“Εστὸς ὃν ἠρητορικὴ δύναμις περὶ ἑκάστου τοῦ θεωροῦμαι τῶ ἐνδεχόμενου τριβάνου. (*Estô de rhetorikê dunamis peri hekaston tou theôresai to endechomenon pithanon*; *Rhetoric* 1.2, 1355b.)

Or, as the usual translations have it, “Rhetoric is a faculty of observing in each case the available means of persuasion.” As I have argued elsewhere, there are ambiguities in this definition which arise especially from Aristotle’s use of the verb “observe” (*theôresai*, an aorist infinitive form of *theôrein*), rather than “discover” or “invent” (*heuriskein*), to describe what rhetoric does. Other ambiguities arise, as well, from the locution to *endechomenon pithanon*, “the available means of persuasion,” which can also (and perhaps better) be translated as “what is allowable as persuasive” (“Traditions”). Taken this way, Aristotle’s definition makes rhetoric not an art of discovering or inventing the available means of persuasion in any given case in order to make an argument, but of *observing* or “theorizing” what counts or should count as persuasive in order to make a judgment about an argument that already has been made. Taken alongside Aristotle’s opening remarks on rhetoric as an art of “observing”—*theôrein* again—why some speakers or speeches are persuasive (*Rhetoric* 1.1, 1354a), this reading makes rhetoric a fundamentally critical and theoretical art, whose function is to “observe,” explicate and judge the persuasiveness of any given instance of civic discourse, and to theorize about the principles of persuasion in such discourse.

I think both readings of Aristotle’s definition are defensible—on one hand, rhetoric as an art of invention and production—on the other hand, rhetoric as an art of critical judgment and theory—and I think the motives of each run through the *Rhetoric*, so that he sometimes seems to be offering “how-to” advice, and at other times offering a theoretical, *philosophical* account of the principles of argumentation and persuasion in practical civic discourse, or in other words a hermeneutic notable, for example, that Aristotle’s brief treatment of delivery in Book 3 says nothing at all about how-to, and basically flags what-to-watch-out-for in the ways that emotive speech can lend what the speaker says a spurious persuasiveness that works on unsophisticated crowds.

But whether that assessment of Aristotle’s motives is true or not, it certainly is true that modern rhetoric has evolved, from its

Neo-Aristotelian beginnings, chiefly as such an art. Aristotle is not the only reason for that, of course. Another is the institutional motives of the modern research university, with its origins in nineteenth-century German *Wissenschaft* (“science”), for which the model of humanistic scholarship was, and still is, philology, hermeneutics, criticism, and theory. Thus the modern discipline of rhetorical studies has developed as a Neo-Aristotelian “literary criticism of oratory,” a scholarly discipline offering *wissenschaftlich* accounts of “rhetorical” discourse (however that may be defined), and of the history of “rhetoric” as well (conceived as a history of rhetorical theories). Consequently, rhetoric in this modern tradition is not so easily distinguished from, or continually risks collapsing into, what ancient culture would have called philosophy and grammar: that is, again, philology, hermeneutics, criticism, theory. In short, it can be argued that those who “do” rhetorical scholarship in different disciplinary locations across the Humanities these days are not rhetoricians per se, but philosophers, historians, and grammarians of the rhetorical. In this mode, rhetoric cannot easily maintain a distinct disciplinary identity, even as it maintains its status as “serious scholarship” (within the modern university as configured since the nineteenth century).

Within the central classical tradition, what defines rhetoric as rhetoric is ultimately not the activity of rhetorical criticism, or even rhetorical theorizing—though these are not forgotten—but a pedagogical tradition, in which the primal scene is the declamation exercise, a “theater” of antilogistic argument, where the performer not only contemplates and critiques but also, and more importantly, rehearses and directly (if fictively) experiences both rhetorical performance and the values of a rhetorical culture devoted to free debate (Walker, “Traditions”; and Axer). The perpetuation of this experience alone, and the habits of thought and speech it cultivates, even through periods of political and intellectual authoritarianism, has been one of the chief contributions of rhetoric to Western civilization. The point I wish to stress for now, however, is the simple and perhaps obvious one that what makes and has made rhetoric rhetoric, as distinct from philosophy or “grammatical” (literary) study—the propaedeutic disciplines on which it rests—is its orientation toward the production of a *rhetôra*.

Let me be a little more particular. The goal of the art of rhetoric, in this tradition, is to produce a person (or many persons) schooled in ethico-political thought, and capable of intelligent, ethically responsible deliberation as well as persuasive speech and writing in any facet of public and private life. (See Isocrates, *Against the Sophists* 21; and *Antidosis* 46–50, 180–191, 253–257, 274–275.) This requires from the student, as Dionysius of Halicarnassus says, “a ready nature,

careful study, and laborious exercise" (φύσις δεξιά, μάθεσις δεξιότης, *κοκῆσις ἐπιτροπὸς* [phusis dexia, mathesis akribēs, askēsis epitropos] *Peri Mīmēseōs* fr. II, Usener-Rademacher 200). By "ready nature" we can understand both talent and preparation (in the studies proper to rhetoric); by "careful study" we can understand the activities of rhetorical criticism; and by "laborious exercise" we can understand everything from oral interpretation and imitation of canonic authors to invention and performance in progymnasmata and declamation exercises, over a period of years. What is required from the teacher, as Isocrates says, is on one hand the ability to model and illustrate the eloquence the student is aiming to acquire—in "demonstration" speeches (*epideixis*)—and on the other hand an ability to "explain things as exactly as possible, so as to leave out nothing that can be taught" (τὸν δὲ διδάσκαλον ρᾶ μὲν οὐτως δεξιότης οἷόν τ' εἶναι διελθεῖν τὸς ακριβὸς οἰον εἶναι διελθεῖν ἥστε μέδεν τὸν διδασκάλον τα μεν ἡοῦ *Against the Sophists* 17). What we have, in sum, is a teacher who is a course of exemplar-texts but can also *perform* and reflect upon the discourse those texts embody and that the student is seeking to produce. The student, meanwhile, is studying, rehearsing and imitating exemplar-texts in order to internalize their voices and their characteristic styles and ways of arguing, and ultimately to re-synthesize those internalized exemplars in original invention—thus developing a *habitude*, while the teacher critiques and explains whatever can be explained, in order to guide the development of that habitude as well as possible. The result is not a person who creates discourse according to "the rules of rhetoric"—not, at least, in the sense of methodically applying those rules as a sort of algorithm (or recipe) to produce a text—but a person who has internalized and can "spontaneously" and improvisationally generate the kind of discourse that the rules of rhetoric recognize as excellent. This is what Augustine means when he observes in *De Doctrina* that no-one can *be* eloquent and think of are no help to someone who lacks an internal feel for it (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.4; for a parallel modern argument, see Hartwell). The purpose, then, of the classical rhetorical curriculum in this tradition is to develop that feel.

What have we come to, then? We come, I think, to a rhetorical curriculum that looks surprisingly like *creative writing*, but with some important differences. First, the training is not limited to "creative" or literary types of discourse (in the modern sense of "literary"), though it includes them; it includes the whole realm of practical and

epideictic discourse among its possible objects of study. More importantly, it understands all public discourse (including the literary) as civic discourse, and as argumentation embedded in a culture of anthology—and it remains focused, as I have said, on the production of a person with sophisticated skills in ethico-political thought and speech, whatever sort of discourse that person eventually may produce. At the same time, this curriculum *would* resemble creative writing (as we know it) insofar as the student would be examining exemplar-texts not primarily to write critical essays about them, or even rhetorical analyses, but to perform them, imitate them, internalize and synthesize their discourse, and re-produce and re-perform that discourse in original invention.

The documents of this rhetorical tradition are the documents of this curriculum. The handbooks that survive perhaps are better understood not as rhetorical "theory," but as apparatus meant to accompany declamation exercises, explaining what can be explained. (But if what Augustine says is right, and I think it is, those explanations would have no meaning unless they named and clarified something the student already had experienced.) In some cases, such as the usual explanations of what kinds of declamation-problems "have stasis" and are declaimable or not, the handbooks actually seem to be speaking *to the teacher*, providing meta-commentary on what students should be practicing with (or not). Likewise, when it comes to rhetorical criticism—such as the critical essays of Dionysius of Halicarnassus—what we find is not quite a rhetorical hermeneutic—though he's capable of that—but instead a painstaking analysis of which aspects of which authors are good models for imitation, and for which purposes. That is: rhetorical criticism in this tradition approaches texts from the "writerly" perspective gestured at by Howells: they are studied with an eye to "how it was done," and "how can I do that," in order to appropriate those features, those rhetorical moves, those modes of argumentation and style, those ways of thought and speech, that seem useful for the purposes of the *rhetôr* in his or her particular historical situation (or "now").

Is there anything that counts as "theory" in this tradition? Perhaps we find it in the occasional defenses or justifications of the art, such as Isocrates' *Antidosis*, Aelius Aristides' *Against Plato in Defense of Rhetoric*, or the prologues of the handbooks, or in "meta" discussions of what a *rhetôr*'s training should include, such as Cicero's *De Oratore*, or Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*. Perhaps we find "theory," in another sense, in everything else that constitutes the ethico-political *philosophia* embodied, for example, in Isocrates' panegyrics, or the orations of Aelius Aristides, Libanius, and other Second Sophistic

figures, or Dionysius' history of the Roman republic, or Cicero's collected works, and so forth.

Which brings me, with the breathtaking exactitude of an inevitable logic, to the sophist's shoes. Or, rather, to that famous passage at the end of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* (34, 183b-184a), where he ridicules Gorgias and other sophists for teaching by giving their students speeches to be learned by heart—or, I strongly suspect, passages from speeches—as if (says Aristotle) one were to teach shoemaking by handing out examples of shoes. One might ask: should one hand out systematic treatises on the theory of shoemaking, *without* showing the students any shoes? And would one not discuss the shoes, and explain all that could be explained? But the analogy is bad to start with, and misleading: speeches are not shoes, and are not made in the way that shoes are made. And the memorizing of exemplars was a preliminary stage of instruction. The students are memorizing speeches to perform them, and performing them to learn to inhabit them, *and to be inhabited by them*, on the way to acquiring a "feel" for discursive art—what it feels like to be Demosthenes, or Lysias, or Thucydides speaking—so that the rules of rhetoric, when they are discussed, will have something to elucidate and will be meaningful. Aristotle, I think—and this is my conclusion—is mistaken on this point.

### Author's Note

Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are my own.

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