

On the Nonexistence of Words

Prooemion

1. Why speak if that which is spoken is not true? For the purpose of speech is truth and of force action and of action the exercise of purpose. What I have found, great truth seekers in the audience, I wished not to utter. My utterance sought to undo understanding and unveil untruthfulness. I shall pass over the many haphazard counterpoints I baked in many sleepless nights. No more! I feel now dutifully determined to serve my purpose of truth, even if such truth unravels all I hold dear. 2. If the pen is mightier than the sword, then in the pen the ink is dry. For while certainly that blade of force, unsheathed and at our necks, holds influence on my many men, the pen stands poised paralyzed to the page, unable to conceive of any word. For the word, my friends, well written, well spoken, well heard, does not exist.

Narration

3. I asked a poet friend of mine, a man for whom words consume both occupation and passtime, to point me towards an apple. He gestured to a sweet red orb, for which no apple could be found. Found not in the stem and seeds, found not in the hue or leaves or any characteristic which it contains. Found not in symbols, those raving scribbles or dignified imprints constituting volumes of forgotten lore. And found not, it pains me to admit, in the minds of many martyrs like myself, for whom words stand as vivified and virtuous illusory spirits.

Proposition

4. Neither as symbols writ, as utterances spit, or as concepts composite, do words exist. Observe as I prove this and more.

Proof

5. Now if anything exists, it is either object tangible or concept understandable, and a word is neither of these. Since if a word is an object, it must be all objects at once, for the word everything is everything and nothing nothing. I touch the wool, but do I touch the sheep? And if it is a concept, it must possess some mental form, some definition supreme. A cup. What is a cup? A cup is a glass, and glass a window, and eyes the windows to the soul. Else it is a mug, and a mug, a face, and a face is found on a clock to tell time. A cup then either reveals the soul or the time. Gods, if you are not but words, I urge you, clear my confusion!

6. Some will argue the written word can be seen, and felt when etched in stone. Letters are, of course, apparent in principle. But words? Certainly that which is truly seen is indeed seen to all. Visions and ghosts are seen by madmen, we hardly claim these illusions exist. And does the child

see the word before learning to read? I humbly admit I do not understand the Mandarin character the same as a Chinese child even 10 years my junior. And within the same language, such principles hold true. Dates and dates are different. A bow fires an arrow at my enemies and a bow bestows honor on my friends. Does the Brit consider the same symbols for color as that of the American? Oh U, you dastardly vowel, what a state you have thrown us to.

7. Others may say that since we cannot speak of that which does not exist, and I speak of the nonexistence of words, words must necessarily exist. But we can speak of that which does not exist. For as I mentioned prior, that which does not exist is either not tangible or understandable. But the ignorant man can speak truths which he does not know. Consider the blind man, who will find man astonished at his ignorant understanding of color. Of course red is becoming of apples and blood and anger and leaves in the fall. But what is color? To him, that man to which sight has forgone him, color does not exist. Thus we, full of sight but blind to words, may speak of things which do not exist.

8. But isn't this very speech a counterexample to my argument? I hear final defenders of the word cry. The mere 'fact' we can reference things with words is a testament to their existence, they will claim. I say 'tree' and you think of the trunks and foliage. Such an argument is one of ignorance. Effects of causes do not prove the existence of said cause. Our Athenian brothers and sisters shuddered at the crack of lightning, believing it proof of Zues' rage, rage which is today diffused by explanations of electrons. We hear some noise and a concept we think after. That the noise and concept are one and the same is a blatant disregard and abhorrent misuse of the ethereal principles of logos.

9. This Logos which my opponents use and you yourself must be wary of, is false and dangerous. Those who advocate for the existence of words do not have your best interests at heart. They summon illusions, obscuring intent. They whisper slimy remarks, fighting facts with fictitious slander. For a defender of words wishes words would exist for their own sake, and for the sake of their works. They care not for the pursuit of truths, they care not for the dispellation of myths and illusions. They care only for the preservation of antiquity, claiming "that's the way things have always been done." Hear not these lies, for they use words to conjure them, and laugh in the face of *reductio ad absurdum*.

Epilogue

10. I truly do not know what more to say. What more will we wish when words, weak with whimsy and woe, witheringly wilt under our logical regimes. Will the world be better under such knowledge? I respond with a resounding yes. As long as we love truth over lies, love brave progress in the face of ignorance over static stopping in the face of fear, life will be much better

for my discovery. From lofty fictions like paradisaal birds, thus crash the men that listen to my words.

Analysis

This piece of epideictic oratory serves as a persuasive piece on the bizarre claim that words do not exist. Ironically, it uses the study of words found in classical rhetoric to do so. The speech is equal parts Gorgias' *On Not Being* in its defense of a ludicrous and impossible claim and his *Encomium of Helen* in its use of that claim to demonstrate a variety of ornamentation techniques. It is composed in the fashion of ancient speech: containing a prooemion, narration, proof, and epilogue. It also contains a proposition in the style of *Encomium of Helen*.

All three artistic means of invention, Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, can be found in the speech. Ethos is found first in the prooemion when the speaker claims "what I have found, great truth seekers in the audience, I wished not to utter." In establishing a hesitance that was overcome by the speaker and a duty to "serve [his] purpose of truth," the audience is given a sense of trust in the validity of the words to follow. Reverse Ethos through an *ad hominem* argument is employed in the final section of the proof in characterizing the "Logos which my opponents use" as "false and dangerous."

Pathos is found in the end of most paragraphs of the proof to add a sense of climax to each point made. The apostrophe "Oh gods, if you are not but words, I urge you, clear my confusion!" echoes Cicero's "O ye immortal gods, where on earth are we?" (Cicero) in his *First Oration Against Catiline* and emphasizes a confused state in the audience. Another apostrophe, "Oh U, you dastardly vowel, what a state you have thrown us to," addresses the letter U for the same purpose, while also making use of a paronomasic anadiplosis. Hyperbole at the end of paragraph 8 is used for Pathos in calling cause and effect argument a "blatant disregard and abhorrent misuse of the ethereal principles of logos."

A variety of forms of Logos are used in the proof, but these all fit under a subheader of logical argument found primarily in Gorgias. First, the categories of existence are established as "either object tangible or concept understandable," and then the word is established as belonging to neither of these categories. The rest of the proof defends the claim against supposed

counterarguments: (1) “the written word can be seen and felt,” (2) “we cannot speak of that which does not exist,” (a Parmenidean thought) and (3) the argument of cause and effect. The exception to the Logos-centric proof is found in the final section, in which Logos is ignored in favor of an *ad hominem* attack practiced by ancient rhetoricians.

This speech, much like *Encomium of Helen*, primarily serves as a demonstration of rhetorical tricks and ornamentation rather than a genuinely persuasive speech, and the Gorgianic figures are especially represented. Antithesis is found in “fighting facts with fictitious slander,” and “As long as we love truth over lies, love brave progress in the face of ignorance over static stopping in the face of fear.” Paronomasia is used to support a logical argument in “Dates and dates are different. A bow fires an arrow at my enemies and a bow bestows honor on my friends,” and combined with anadiplosis for rhetorical effect in “Consider the blind man, who will find man astonished.” Alliteration is most apparent in “What more will we wish when words, weak with whimsy and woe, witheringly wilt,” but is used throughout the speech. The Narration is a special nod to Gorgias in the use of the tricolonic, anaphoric homoeoteleuton:

“Neither as symbols writ, as utterances spit, or as concepts composite, do words exist,” which is directly followed with “Observe as I prove this and more,” mirroring Gorgias’ “listen as I turn from one argument to another.” (Gorgias 254) The homoeoteleuton of “From lofty fictions like paradisaal birds, thus crash the men that listen to my words,” in the final line also mirrors Gorgias’ “I wished to write a speech that would be Helen’s encomion and my own *paignion*.” (Gorgias 256)

Nods to the tactics of other rhetoricians are used as well. Ethos is used similarly to Lysias’ *Speech Against the Grain Dealers* when he says “I feel forced to prosecute them.” The Aporia in “I truly do not know what more to say” at the beginning of the epilogue is a direct emulation of Lysias. As previously mentioned, Cicero is emulated in the apostrophes and *ad hominem* attacks. This speech also uses praeteritio in “I shall pass over the many haphazard counterpoints,” and opens with an erotima as Cicero does in *Catiline*. The tactics of modern rhetoricians are present as well. Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” is the inspiration for “the word, my friends, well written, well spoken, well heard, does not exist,” in its use of zeugmatic, tricolonic, anaphora (as opposed to antistrophe in the Lincoln). Anaphora is a theme in the character of this speech, as it was for

Cicero, Churchill, and Martin Luther King among others. The narration repeats “found not” and the end of the Proof repeats “They care.”

While I can’t discuss all rhetorical devices used (and I promise this is not a purposeful praeteritio), some rarer forms of ornamentation include the synecdoche “trunks and foliage” in place of tree, which serves the additional purpose of not saying the word ‘tree,’ which would hurt the argument. Onomatopoeia is found in “shuddered at the crack of lightning,” personification in “U, you dastardly vowel,” and “the pen stands poised paralyzed to the page,” irony in the metaphorical chiasmus “If the pen is mightier than the sword, then in the pen the ink is dry,” and oxymorons in “full of sight but blind,” and “the ignorant man can speak truths.” These oxymorons point out that the composition of the speech itself embodies another rhetorical trick: paradox. A speech composed of words designed to deny their existence.

Works Cited

Gorgias in “Gorgias' Encomium of Helen.” *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, edited by George A. Kennedy, translated by George A. Kennedy, OUP USA, 2007, pp. 251-256.

Cicero, M. Tullius. “The First Oration Against Catiline.” *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, literally translated by C. D. Yonge, B. A. London. Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden. 1856.