Introduction: Why rhythm?

For harmony is concord, and concord is unity... Plato, Symposium

“In rhythm, there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity... Consciousness, paralyzed in its freedom, plays, totally absorbed in the playing.” So warns Emmanuel Levinas, for whom rhythm is an uncontrollable and dangerous violation of the unity of the self. To submit to rhythm and harmony, according to him, is to expose oneself to the peril of blurring the boundaries of one’s selfhood, of losing oneself in togetherness, of abandoning one’s freedom in exchange for a “mystical participation” in the experience of the other (Levinas 1989: 132; Alford 2002: 46–47). Levinas’ hostility is grounded in a deep suspicion toward the emotional power and effect that rhythm commands on the human psyche. Rhythm lures with the promise of harmony. It demands participation. It carries the judgment away. It takes us hostage and invites us to surrender, to assent, to go along with it. In other words, it is – or could be – the ultimate rhetorical tool. And in Cicero’s ascending scale of the priorities of rhetoric, of which “to prove is a necessity, to delight is to bring pleasure, to sway is victory” (Orat. 21), rhythm assumes a crucial role in the highest and most important action, that of rhetorical transport.

From Gorgias in the fifth century BC to Joseph Rhacendytes in the fourteenth century AD, we find a number of witnesses to the emotional power and effect of oratorical rhythm. Cicero claims that rhythm is the life force of oratory, and devotes about a third of his treatise Orator – where he sets out to paint a picture of the perfect speaker – to a discussion of its intricacies. “I have often seen the assembly let out a shout,” he says, “when the words are aptly rounded out with a cadence. For the ear expects that the words draw the sentence together.” Rhythm, he contends, is naturally in the ear. A good pace is something that even the best of orators attain with much toil, yet even the worst of audiences is able to judge
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accurately – and, indeed, have come to expect and relish (Orat. 50).

With noticeable pleasure, Cicero – whose impeccable rhythms excited
both applause and envy – describes the unrestrained applause that a double
trochee drew out of a crowd at the closing of a speech (Orat. 63); gloatingly,
he compares those who pay no heed to rhythm to wrestlers “untrained in
gymnastics” (Orat. 68). And in a forceful metaphor, he declares that “those
thunderbolts of Demosthenes would not have been hurled with such vigor,
unless whirled onwards by rhythm” (Orat. 70).

That the classical and medieval rhetoricians expended much effort on
mastering the elusive art of rhythmic discourse is clear from their frank
comments on others’ successes and failures. That they sought assiduously
to train their students in the subtle nuances of a good pace is amply attested
in the rhetorical handbooks. Yet as modern scholars of rhetoric – despite the
more than 2,000 years of rhetorical practice, theory, and commentary –
we do not seem to understand exactly why rhythm is allotted so much
attention, other than as a nice but disposable embellishment to an otherwise
sound argument.

Perhaps we could seek the reasons for disparaging rhythm, broadly speak-
ing, in the split of argument from language and of reason from emotion
during the Enlightenment, including the subsequent opposition and pri-
oritization of the former over the latter. Perhaps we could also search for
reasons in twentieth-century rhetorical theory and practice, which place
enormous – sometimes exclusive – emphasis on argumentation and reason-
ing, at the expense of form and style, despite high regard for the rhetorical
theory and literary philosophy of figures such as I. A. Richards, Kenneth
Burke, and Chaïm Perelman, who give much attention to language form.

Or we could look at the institutional history of the field(s) of rhetoric
and writing in North America after the National Council of Teachers of
English in 1911 and the National Association for Academic Teachers of
Public Speaking in 1914 broke away from the Modern Language Associa-
tion, when English traditionally assumed guardianship of “literature” –
which included the reluctantly added component of “composition,” while
Speech took custody of “rhetoric” (Graff 1987; Crowley 1998; Mailloux
2006; Walker 2005). In an effort to articulate the disciplinary boundaries
and academic status of rhetoric, Speech Communication scholars adopt a
methodology as close to “genuine science” as possible, and based on obser-
vation, experiment, analysis, and articulation of results in the form of a
generalized conclusion (Mailloux 2006: 11–12). The unity between practice
and theory, a salient characteristic of the Western rhetorical tradition, is
broken into a domain for analysis, that is, research in rhetorical studies, and
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a domain for production, that is, the teaching of speech or writing (Walker 1998 and 2005), with the ostensible privilege implied in the terms “field” and “discipline” bestowed on the former over the latter. Thus emphasis in research shifts toward analysis – after the classical model provided by Aristotle – rather than the production of discourse. The proper concern of the analysis and theory of rhetoric should be value-judgments and their statements, argues Karl Wallace, Head of the Department of Speech and Theater at the University of Illinois from 1947 to 1968. The substance of rhetoric is “good reasons,” that is, “statement[s] offered in support of an ought proposition” (Wallace 1963; Leff 2006). Wallace insists that the focus of rhetoric should be the invention of arguments – or, to put it more simply, coming up with ideas of what could be acceptable things to say in various situations. Consequently, rhetoric takes a more or less Aristotelian, or rather “neo-Aristotelian,” turn toward the study and analysis of argumentation, with little, if any, attention given to form, style, and delivery and much weight attributed to Aristotle’s theory of the enthymeme, regardless of the fact that Aristotle himself treated style in no small detail, and Theophrastus, his student and successor, is said to have composed a now lost treatise on the subject. For the most part, Aristotle – and more specifically, Aristotle’s preference for an analytical approach toward argument – assumes a central position in modern rhetorical theory and practice. Theory takes the upper hand; it becomes a neutral tool for discovering and critiquing arguments as well as an antidote against unwanted persuasion.

Such, at least, appears to be the picture of the discipline – that rhetorical studies are primarily concerned with detecting and critiquing persuasion – and not only to those working actively “inside” the field. In an online book review for the New York Times Select of May 6, 2007, Stanley Fish identifies Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition – or what he describes as the Aristotelian tradition – as the basis of rhetorical theory and practice for the last 2,400 years. Aristotle, he contends, considers the subject of style and persuasion unworthy of serious discussion, but sets off to list all devices employed by people who, motivated by partisan passion, attempt

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2 I am not using this term in the strict sense associated with the so-called Chicago school of neo-Aristotelianism, but as a broader designation of excessive – if not exclusive – attention to reasoning and argumentation.
3 As, for example, in Friedrich Solmsen’s two-part survey “The Aristotelian tradition in ancient rhetoric” (Solmsen 1941).
4 For a pertinent discussion of the state of contemporary rhetorical studies, see the special issue of Rhetoric Society Quarterly 36.2 (2000), titled “Performing Ancient Rhetorics: A Symposium.”
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to deceive and “turn us away from the truth.” Fish then gives the following summary of the classical tradition and the current state of rhetorical studies:

Aristotle’s “Rhetoric” may be the first, but is certainly not the last treatise that performs the double task of instructing us in the ways of deception and explaining (regretfully) why such instruction is necessary. The Romans, Cicero, and Quintilian took up the same task, and they were followed by countless manuals of rhetoric produced in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the 18th and 19th centuries and down to the present day. A short version of the genre – George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” – has been particularly influential and is still often cited 60 years after its publication. (Fish 2007)

Fish will go on to argue that, although the ancient luminaries have presumed rhetoric to be the art of deception, that is, the art of skillfully arranging and presenting facts in a beguiling and persuasive manner, “facts” cannot be separated from their discursive context – which seems to be the unfortunate assumption of the book in question (Jackson and Jamieson’s unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of [Disinformation], 2007).

Although Fish appreciates the tight relationship between content and form, he certainly overestimates the Aristotelian thread in rhetorical history. He is right to point out Aristotle’s suspicion toward persuasion, style, and delivery. Indeed, the Rhetoric is just one part of Aristotle’s larger philosophical project of producing enlightened political leaders, who should know how to use – but not be fooled by – the discursive arts, in order to achieve a happy and well-ordered society (Poster 1997; McAdon 2001). However, Fish is quite wrong about Cicero and Quintilian – not to mention the entire medieval and Renaissance tradition of rhetorical manuals. Not only do they not regard style and delivery with suspicion, they encourage their study and practice in every way. (One need only remember Erasmus, whose immensely popular handbook On Copia of Words and Ideas, a “crash course” in rhetoric, so to speak, is almost entirely based on stylistic precepts.) Significantly enough, Fish rounds off his account with Orwell, thus effectively identifying the history of rhetoric with the Aristotelian tradition and the goal of rhetoric with linguistic transparency.

Fish’s position represents perhaps a distilled version of the impression that the practices of teaching rhetoric and writing leave with those not directly working in the field. Teaching rhetoric and writing has shifted, for the most part, to teaching argument analysis and argument invention, that is, to discovering things to say on a given side of an issue (usually one); to analyzing the relevance and validity of those things; to discovering
positions that define oneself and others; or to finding ways to create shared meaning. “Strategy” is the usual keyword in describing the reading and composition activities prescribed for students in the majority of textbooks – whether it is a “critical thinking strategy” or “writing strategies,” which involve “narrating,” “defining,” “classifying,” “comparing and contrasting,” and “arguing.” Style, if given any place at all, is usually relegated to an explanation of effective transitions, correct grammar and syntax, word choice, and mechanics – with occasional attention to figurative language. Coverage of rhythm is consistently missing. Stylistic issues are generally treated in more detail in the so-called “handbooks,” which – as the name suggests – are reference tools, not teaching texts; they usually contain brief descriptions of prescribed pre-writing activities, an invariable guide to correct grammar, some discussion of conspicuous syntactical effects, a guide to correct punctuation and mechanics, some discussion of word choice, and a guide to documenting sources. The content is organized in a manner made easy for quick reference rather than in-sequence and in-depth study. The presentation and discussion of style are equated, for the most part, with clear expression and correct grammar and syntax.

Not all composition textbooks, however, ignore the stylistic and performative dimensions of rhetoric. The University of Chicago’s core writing course, for example, still uses material based on Joseph Williams’ popular book Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, whose pedagogy is driven by form and syntax rather than argument. But what I mean to suggest here is that, if our teaching is any indicator of what we believe, Fish is quite right in assuming that content is typically opposed to form and argument to style. Accordingly, a systematic and comprehensive treatment of style in our composition textbooks is rare, if not entirely absent. Williams’ book is by no means mainstream – if it continues to be used, it is only because it produces results. As a whole, our writing classrooms offer a version of the rhetorical tradition that is deeply suspicious of what to us appear as “non-rational” methods of persuasion.

The situation with rhetorical theory (as opposed to rhetorical pedagogy) is slightly, but not much, better. Scholars have been preoccupied with defining and redefining the substance, tools, and scope of rhetoric, its involvement in various modes of discourse, its relationship with the human subject, human history, language, knowledge, and power. In popular sourcebooks for twentieth-century rhetorical theory one expects to find selections by Ferdinand de Saussure, Richard Weaver, Kenneth Burke, Terry Eagleton, and James Berlin, all primarily concerned with articulating the definition and function of rhetoric or the relationship between rhetoric
and other aspects of language and intellectual or social activities, such as
dialectology, culture, identity, and politics. The actual materiality and shape
of language, if brought up at all, is considered briefly and on an abstract
level, thus extending the emphasis on systems of reasoning, at the expense
of other aspects of discourse, such as figurative expression and the effects
of rhythm and sound.

And yet perhaps the divergence between the modern approach, which
values argument and content, and the classical and medieval approach,
which delights equally in the variety of language effects and in the power
of its thought, stems also from a fundamental difference in ontological
sensibility. For us moderns, being tends to be being-alone; togetherness is
incidental and temporary; successful communication can happen at times
but is not a given – from which stems our anxiety about shared meaning
and self-expression. For the ancients, being is being-together; successful
communication is an unproblematic possibility – but its intended effect is
not; shared experience is always there – but its outcome is not; hence the
interest in producing results, without the ontological unease.

It would be fair to point out here that form and style have received more
attention from scholars engaged in historical research, for example Richard
Lanham’s keen analyses of both Renaissance and modern prose (Lanham
1974; Lanham 1976), Brian Vickers’ insights into the emotional value of the
rhetorical figures (1970: 83–121), Kenneth Dover’s now classic exploration of
Greek prose style (Dover 1997), or Jeanne Fahnestock’s bracing study of the
relationship between rhetorical figures and arguments in science (1999) –
just to mention a few. Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in
style on the part of composition scholars, such as Paul Butler (2008) and
Holcomb and Killingworth (2010). Yet, on the whole, the power of verbal
form as a shared creative activity, its appeal to the senses and emotions as
well as its contributions to individual and collective assent, so prominent
in the classical and medieval tradition, have been on the periphery of our
attention, despite some notable discussions of the role of emotions by
Daniel Gross (2006), Laura Micciche (2007), and Susan Miller (2008). Style – and especially rhythm – is still demoted as the proper interest of
“formalists” and “philologists.”

Whatever the origins of our attitudes, to sidestep issues of language form
is to overlook a large part of the rhetorical tradition, which recognizes the
immediate, intuitive, and emotional responses evoked by sheer structures
of sound. The “fearful trembling and tearful pity” that poetry is capable
of imparting to its listeners are, according to Gorgias, in no small part
brought about by its meter (Hel. 8). Quintilian is even more explicit:
“The study of structure is of the utmost value, not merely for charm of the ear, but for stirring the soul. For in the first place nothing can penetrate to the emotions that stumbles at the portals of the ear, and secondly, man is naturally attracted by harmonious sounds. Otherwise it would not be the case that musical instruments, in spite of the fact that their sounds are inarticulate, still succeed in exciting a variety of different emotions in the hearer” (Inst. 9.4.9–10, tr. Butler, Loeb). Quintilian will go on to observe that sometimes it is the melody and harmony of language alone – despite the mediocrity of its thought – that wins praise. Different rhythms, he says, are needed in order to send an army into battle or to make a successful supplication to a benefactor. And if Quintilian describes the effects of rhythm and melody in terms of emotional transport, the Byzantine intellectual Michael Psellus goes one step further. While painting the excitement produced by the quickening pace of a homily by Gregory of Nazianzus, he sees the congregation marvel, cheer, and even break into adance (Levy 1912: 58–59) – such is the power of its rhythm that it draws outbodily reactions. Among more recent rhetoricians, Kenneth Burke will explain the same effect in the following way: rhythm is “closely allied with ‘bodily’ processes,” and its perception is so “natural” that “even a succession of uniform beats will be interpreted as a succession of accented and unaccented beats” (Burke 1931: 140).

To judge by the extant treatises, late classical and – especially – medieval rhetorical theory is rather preoccupied with form and style. But despite the general recognition of a relationship between stylistic form and the arousal or quelling of feeling, prescriptive associations of particular forms with types of emotion are rare. We will, for example, find a discussion of “beauty,” “vehemence,” and “swiftness” in Hermogenes, and we will find catalogues of figures and meters primarily associated with one type of style or another, but we will rarely see directions on how to arouse a particular emotion such as anger or jealousy. More common are analyses of specific passages in terms of their stylistic and emotional effects, usually with attention to their rhetorical context. The arousal of feeling, although intimately tied to language structure, is understood as a contingent, kairotic event, which cannot be strictly circumscribed by the use of this or that figure or meter. And this freedom from narrow prescriptions may be the reason why simple lists of figures, tropes, and meters are found much more frequently – especially as we move into the medieval period – than long accounts of the emotional power of style. Practical study of language structure affords a much keener understanding of its potential emotional effects than any amount of theoretical exposition.
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Indeed, it may be that the greatest achievement of the medieval rhetoricians (especially in Western Europe) is the discovery that form alone can be used as a tool for invention — and even as a tool for teaching an entire course in rhetoric. The handling of form was felt not merely as an embellishment, but as inseparable from the handling of subject matter. As Michael Psellus puts it, “the special power of this art [i.e. rhetoric] is apparent in its excellence of composition and its flowers of fine diction, but its pride is not merely persuasive falsehood, or speaking on both sides of an issue. It also cleaves to an exacting muse and blossoms with philosophic thoughts and finely-spoken turns of phrase, and its audience is drawn by both” (Chron. 6.197, tr. Walker 2001: 13). Psellus sees rhetoric as an instrument not simply for the adornment of philosophical thoughts, but also for their creation in aesthetically pleasing turns of phrase (Walker 2001: 13). A fuller understanding of the rhetorical tradition, especially the insufficiently studied medieval centuries, would reveal a high level of attention to form—content synergies that may rectify the current imbalance.

Two passages from On Invention, one of the texts ascribed to Hermogenes, illustrate how stylistic form comprised an indelible part of the invention process. The treatise was routinely used for teaching purposes throughout the late antique and Byzantine periods, and is intended to give practical advice on how to invent and structure an oration. It is divided into four books: on proemium (that is, oratorical introduction), on narration (that is, exposition of the facts), on confirmation (that is, argument for or against), and on features of style. Although style has a separate book devoted to it, observations on the formal qualities of language are common throughout the treatise. The book on proemium begins by listing the principles of invention as well as offering hypothetical rhetorical situations. Introductions, the author says, can be invented from suspicions (hypolēpeis), that is, from amplifying existing suspicions in the audience; from subdivision (hypodiairesis), that is, from dividing and building the charges on top of one another; or from superfluity (periousia), that is, from listing hypothetical charges that could have been brought against the defendant but have not. After this, the author gives the following advice:

ἐὰν μὲν οὖν θελήσωμεν πολιτικώτερον στῆσαι τὸ προοίμιον, εἰς τὴν ἀξίωσιν ψιλὴν αὐτὸ στήσομεν. ἐὰν δὲ προστιθῶμεν καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν τῆς ἀξιώσεως ἁπτόμενοι τοῦ πράγματος αὐτοῦ, πανηγυρικότερα γίνεται ἡ βάσις, καὶ μᾶλιστα ἐν μὴ τὰ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ἄχρι τέλους ἀπλῶς εἴπωμεν ἀλλ’ ἐπιφωνηματικῶς. ποιεῖ δὲ πανηγυρικὴν τὴν βάσιν καὶ ἡ εὐρυθμία, ἵνα τὸ πανηγυρικὸν διὰ τὴν εὐρυθμίαν ἐν τῷ πράγματι δια τὴν πανηγυρίκαν ἡ διήθεσθαι, ἢ ἐν τῷ λόγῳ διὰ τὴν ἀρχήν ἢ ἐν τῷ νῷ διὰ τὴν ἀρχήν ἢ ἐν τῷ νῷ διὰ τὴν ἀρχήν ἢ ἐν τῷ νῷ διὰ τὴν ἀρχήν ἢ ἐν τῷ νῷ διὰ τὴν ἀρχήν. δεῖ δὲ τὸ προοίμιον ἐν μὲν
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Should we desire to make the proemium more characteristic of political oratory, we shall bring it to a simple conclusion (*axiosis*). Should we also add the reason for the conclusion, engaging the matter itself, the summation (*basis*) becomes more characteristic of panegyric oratory, and even more so if we do not relate the matter from the beginning to the end in a straightforward manner, but by means of maxims. What makes the summation panegyrical is also eurhythmia, so that the panegyrical comes about in two ways, either in the words by means of harmonious rhythm or in the thought by means of the display inherent in the sequence of events. The proemium in political oratory must be expressed in longer, extended cola, but in emotional oratory in more terse and graceful cola. Amplification in proemia can come about from doubling the name and doubling the colon, and the proof for the claim [comes about from adding] the reason.5

The accompanying illustration is on a scenario frequently employed in declamations: the Athenians have imposed a heavy tribute on the islanders, who are forced to sell their children into slavery. Someone introduces a motion in the Assembly to abolish the tribute. The introduction to this motion – equivalent to the claim (protasis) – of the proemium is: “The kinds of evils which the islanders are suffering on account of this tribute, men of Athens, have not escaped neither you nor any of the other Greeks”; the following proof (*kataskeue*) is: “For it is truly no ordinary thing, what they dare to do with their loved ones, that it would escape unnoticed”; then the conclusion (*axiosis*) is: “It befits you, therefore, to take thought of your reputation and relax the tribute on these wretched folk.” To finish with a panegyric flourish while presenting the essence of the matter from beginning to end, the text recommends that the speaker add a sententious summation (*basis*): “Because of it the islands have been forced into the misfortune of childlessness!”

But we should not make the mistake of thinking that the summation is simply a superfluous ornament. An anonymous eleventh-century commentary on *On Invention* explains that phrasing the conclusion in this way will provide a demonstration for the judges that can move them to anger. Because, the Anonymous Commentator says, “to say that on account of these actions the islanders are unfortunate and forced to become childless

is the summation (*basis*), but it is also a definition, which resembles a judgment (*apophasis*)" (τὸ γὰρ εἰπεῖν ὅτι δὲν ἄναγκαζόμεναι δυστυχοῦσιν ἀπαίδιαν αἱ νήσοι, ὅπερ ἔστιν ἡ βάσις, ὁρισμὸς ἔστιν, ὁ δὲ ὁρισμὸς ἀποφασεῖ ἔοικε, *RhGr.*, ed. Walz vii.2: 716). That is, the summation, rather than being simply an embellishment suitable for the panegyrical mode, provides a definition of the problem, which is both demonstrative and agonistic – in other words, the Athenians’ harshness is destroying the islanders, and is doing so in an impious and cruel way. Such a forceful summation, adds Anonymous, is suitable in situations where a speech is measured by a water clock and one must apprise the judges of the situation without engaging in an extended demonstration. In other words, the summation, as Ps.-Hermogenes puts it, will recapitulate the matter from beginning to end and will do so with distinction. What that means, according to Anonymous, is summed up in the following advice: “Should we add also the reason (*ailia*) of the conclusion (*apodosis*), the summation (*basis*) will become more panegyrical in character; further, [the manual-writer] says, if you wish, go ahead and add also the reason of the conclusion – and you will have the bare facts in a nutshell” (ἐὰν δὲ προστιθῶμεν καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν τῆς ἀποδόσεως, πανηγυρικωτέρα γίνεται ἡ βάσις καὶ ἐπιὼν λέγει, εἰ βούλει δὲ πρόσθες καὶ τὴν τῆς ἀξιώσεως αἰτίαν, τούτεστιν αὐτό τὸ πρᾶγμα γυμνόν, *RhGr.*, ed. Walz vii.2: 716). In other words, the suggested form has provided a ready-to-use argumentative matrix.

The text also observes that composing an introduction on the same topic in a political mode would require “doubling the name,” as Demosthenes has done in “first of all, I pray to the gods, both gods and goddesses, for our city and for all of you” and in “on behalf of you and your piety and good reputation.” The advice to “double the name” here serves to force the student to either subdivide a larger category into smaller ones or to come up with attributes for the same category (“gods and goddesses,” “you and your piety and good reputation”). To go back to the previous example, we “double the name” by adding to the implied name “Athenians” the category of “other Greeks” (“neither you nor any of the other Greeks”). The addition itself broadens the options for the ethical argument (“take thought of your good reputation”). The conclusion will follow naturally from this (“relax the tribute and save your good name”). The required form, the demand for a “doubled name,” has become an instrument for argument invention.

The author of *On Invention* also advises the student to make the proemium, and especially its summation (*basis*), panegyrical by means of harmonious rhythm. The word *basis* has several meanings in rhetorical textbooks; one of them is “summation,” as it is used here, but another is