

Response to W. David Hall's "The Primacy of Rhetoric: Ernesto Grassi's Recovery of Humanism and the Possibilities for Philosophy and Religious Studies"

Andrew W. Hass
University of Stirling

I am grateful to David Hall for ushering Ernesto Grassi into the forefront of our thinking about philosophy and religious studies, not least because of the "primacy of rhetoric" that Grassi so clearly advocated. I have long felt the need to restore rhetoric to its early classical prominence, not only because it has been unjustly eclipsed by the movements of rationalism, whether in their scholastic or modern forms, but also because today, both despite postmodernity and as a result of postmodernity, it continues to be viewed with a certain unjust cynicism. Rhetoric has become the language of duplicity, the calling card of politicians, of lobbyists, of lawyers, of media, of evangelists and religious radicals. At best it is the poetry of promise that never matches the prose of practicality. At worst it is the persuasive cant of mountebanks whose ultimate aim is deceit, exploitation and self-profit. Even in the stricter sense of the rules of speaking and writing, rhetoric has little admiration today, amid the hyper-technology that promotes information over knowledge, data over composition. But by returning to Renaissance humanism, and Vico especially, Grassi attempts to invigorate this lost art, precisely because it is *art*, and art as originary, *mythos* over *logos*. I deeply sympathise with this attempt, and this belief. And with Hall's exposition of Grassi's main theoretical intentions, and his analysis of how they might inform a more balanced humanistic response in our contemporary world, I am buoyed that rhetoric might once again figure in our most important discussions – philosophically, religiously, and otherwise.

But of course rhetoric has not been entirely absent from philosophy throughout the course of modernity. It figures in many of the counter-enlightenment figures such as Hamann, or the German Romantics – Herder's and Humboldt's theories of language, for instance. It is treated in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, and then put to considerable use in countering Hegel by Kierkegaard. And its greatest exponent, and its most ardent implementer, is of course Nietzsche. I want to say a few things that complements what Hall, through Grassi, is trying to promote, while showing that there is another lineage of rhetoric that can be drawn upon, and should be drawn upon, in addition to the Renaissance Humanists.

It is utterly surprising that Nietzsche figures not even once in Grassi's *Rhetoric as Philosophy*. Now on one level, it is justified: the book is subtitled "The Humanist Tradition", and if Nietzsche could be in any way called a humanist, it is not in the manner that follows on from the early modern humanists like Vico. In this sense, it is well-known that Nietzsche was anti-humanist. On another level it is also understandable: Nietzsche's philosophy, and indeed his employment of rhetoric, was deeply *critical*, perhaps arch-critical, and as Hall has shown us, Grassi had his reservations about philosophy as a purely critical exercise. And yet, Nietzsche's rhetorical approach – and there is not a

single element of Nietzsche's philosophy that is not fundamentally rhetorical in nature – is not that far away from the Grassi's valorization of invention, imagination, and the creative urge, whether seen through the *ingenium* or through metaphorization. Nietzsche consistently sought out the originary nature of the creative impulse, which for him stood before, and was constitutive of, the rational impulse. That it did not lead to a sense of wholeness or unity in an individual or within humanity, that this human wholeness was itself just a rhetorical illusion, is naturally where Nietzsche would make his departure from the humanist tradition. But it is important not to forget Nietzsche's *modus operandi*: rhetoric very much as philosophy.

Nor should we overlook the critical nature of Nietzsche's rhetoric. Like Grassi, Nietzsche too "was driven by a polemic against the modern philosophical tradition initiated by Descartes" (Hall, p.2). But Nietzsche went further in separating the *res* from the *verbum*: in his hermeneutics, it is not simply that the *verbum* is governed by its historical context, or that language becomes the prerequisite for ontology, but that words, and the concepts we think are attached to them, including those like "being" or "truth", are themselves only ever metaphors, a "sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically intensified". What is critical for Nietzsche is to invent our way out of the impasse that such a hermeneutical breach entails, yet without losing sight (the critical aspect) that this is what we are doing, rhetorically intensifying our world as "reality".

Heidegger, in his way, understood exactly this sense of Nietzsche, when in his Nietzsche lectures of the 1940s he talks about "the will to art as truth". And it is from Nietzsche where Heidegger's notion of the *Abgrund* derives – that abyss or nihilistic space from which all things, all language, and ultimately Being itself, come into the open. One cannot fully understand Heidegger's later move to the poets without understanding his indebtedness to Nietzsche here, an indebtedness that perhaps Grassi bristled from in his insistence that *ars topica* should come before *ars critica* (despite Grassi's own sympathy with the Marxian critique). And yet for Nietzsche, *ars topica* and *ars critica* converge in an *ars rhetorica*, where our creative expressions determine the place from which we start and the limits we can reach.

The rhetorical legacy of Nietzsche, through Heidegger, has, admittedly, led to some of the more excessive gestures of postmodernity, the very gestures that now incite the call to a more ethical humanism, of the kind that Klemm and Schweiker lay out in the form of "integrity", and that Hall solicits by employing Grassi's "ingenuity in the face of necessity". But Nietzsche's legacy cannot be wholly ignored if we are going to take Grassi's notion of the *sensus communis* seriously. For if this legacy has taught us anything, and if the subsequent postmodern critique has taught us anything, it is that our unreflective judgements and communal sense making are never neutral, are never without some invested power structure or ideological undercurrent. If we are to take seriously Marx's *Ideologiekritik*, as Grassi seems to do at least at some level, then we also must be careful of "a *sensus communis* as an innate capacity within the human, a governing principle, grounded by nothing outside the human condition, guiding responses to the claims of integrity" (Hall, pp. 24-

25). What is controlling the guiding, and for whose integrity, we might ask? And though this line of critical questioning may have its own limits, does not integrity demand that we continue to keep it in view, lest, as Klemm and Schweiker have argued, we fall prey to more overhumanisation and hypertheism?

I would want to suggest that rhetoric is important for philosophy because, for both Nietzsche and Grassi, it is the manifestation of the wellspring for all creative thought, imaginative and rational alike, and because it can act as a corrective by showing us, self-critically, the metaphorization, and hence the provisionality, behind all claims to truth. This is not the rhetoric of present day perceptions: duplicitous speech. This is an *ars rhetorica* that *is* truth, the only truth we have. And thus it is just as important to religion. For was not Nietzsche, the self-proclaimed anti-Christ, most deeply religious in his anti-religious rhetoric? Was not that rhetoric precisely the puncturing of a religious (metaphysical) duplicity and an opening of an *Abgrund* that, in its silence, was the most religious of all? Grassi may have debated this, but could not the fantasy of any such religious space be the most "originary insight" we might imagine? What is most powerful about rhetoric is its ability, sometimes wilfully, to reveal an opening *despite itself*. This Plato saw, with his own use of rhetoric. This Nietzsche understood, explicitly. This all poets know, and enact poetically. Perhaps this is what Hall is showing us about Grassi. Perhaps this is what Grassi is showing us about humanism: it goes beyond itself despite itself.