



Talking and Saying Nothing, or Saying Something*

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Abstract

In this article, Joan Francesc Mira analyses the art and craft of public speaking in the West, from antiquity to the present day. The Valencian writer follows a path that takes him through and involves a wide range of cultures, civilisations and religions, different types of professional public speakers (politicians, lawyers, teachers, preachers, etc.) and different genres or practices (theses, religious preaching, debates, meetings, etc.). This journey leads the author to a sharp, critical conclusion on the reasoned and public use of words in the present day, a time of radio and television chat shows.

Keywords

oral language, rhetoric, tradition

Resum

En aquest article, Joan Francesc Mira analitza l'art i l'ofici de la paraula pública a occident, des de l'antiguitat fins als nostres dies. L'escriptor valencià traça un camí que recorre i comprèn múltiples cultures, civilitzacions i religions, diversos tipus de professionals de l'oratoría (el polític, l'advocat, el professor, el predicador...) i diferents gèneres o pràctiques (la tesi, la prèdica religiosa, el debat, el míting...). Aquest recorregut porta l'autor fins a una reflexió final, crítica i punyent, sobre l'ús públic i raonat de la paraula en els nostres temps, el temps de les tertúlies radiofòniques i televisives.

Paraules clau

llenguatge oral, retòrica, tradició

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In the Christian and biblical tradition, which is still (for how long?) predominant in our culture, "in the beginning was the Word", or the word "existed", *verbum, ho logos*. And it seems that the Word was God, or this is what the author of the Gospel of John thought, no doubt influenced by some form of Neo-Platonism or by some other fashionable ideas of the time. Obviously, we could talk about this at length, spin it out forever. (By the way, have you noticed how recent the idea of "spin" is and that a generation or two ago it did not exist? People must not have needed spin thirty years ago. Did they not waffle, or not waffle as much, and had general verbal diarrhoea, or on the radio and television, had not spread so far and become such a problem? Or, did people take more care in expressing themselves, were they more enamoured of linear and specific discourse, not spin – like a yo-yo or a plate of spaghetti – that goes round and round without getting anywhere?) This lecture, or lesson, is starting to reflect its title. Talking, playing with words and sentences, can be an art, and as useful or useless as any other art, aesthetically pleasing or horribly distasteful, entertaining or boring, beautiful or ugly, or however we please. It is an ancient art, an original art, consubstantial in the talking species: humans (angels speak little: usually singing hymns and making music in the heavens).

Though it is true that, in our tradition, the word is the beginning of the world, that does not mean that it is a universal truth or a mystery seen in the origins of all cultures. For the writers of the book of Genesis, God created the world from nothing, and he created it with the Word: *fiat lux*, let there be light, and there was light, etc. This also explains the metaphysical, and theological, value of the divine Word revealed: in the Hebrew bible, the New Testament or the Koran. God has spoken, really, and the reality corresponds to His words: things are as God says they are and cannot and will not ever be any other way. For this reason, the words of the holy book cannot be changed: in the Kabbalah, if you change a word, you might be changing the world; in Islam, the word of Allah only has one language. Talk is constant in the religions based on books and, eventually, that said or dictated is written down. People talk to say something: it would not make sense to talk without saying anything. This idea has been handed down, generation after generation, but we may now have forgotten how to.

In any case, we should remember that, in Greek theogony, the world does not begin with an everlasting and personal God who speaks and creates: in the beginning there was Chaos, not the god-word or god of the word. The transformation from disorder, total confusion and mix-up to an ordered universe, to the cosmos, was not an easy process – there were serious conflicts and tussles between light and dark, between the Earth and the Heavens. The end result, the world of the Olympian gods, is the human condition taken to a superhuman level of perfection: a condition with a natural and civil order, with justice (where possible) and beauty, where the word (that of the gods and of man) is full of meaning and con-

tent. These, then, are the roots, the Greeks, and the Romans, and a somewhat Hellenised Judaism, of what we call Christianity and the Church.

Of the many Greek inventions, rhetoric and politics shouldn't figure amongst the least important: two closely related and perfectly complementary inventions, linked, likewise, to *logos* as word and reasoning. The invention of politics requires the invention of citizens, or what we now call the "popular sovereignty", and some other details that still form part of the conceptual basis of what is known as 'democracy'. And this, as you well know, works in terms of more or less regular assemblies and decision-making powers with respect to laws, public positions, war and peace, and diplomatic or legal conflicts. Democracies worked in terms of the skills of the person speaking to convince their listeners, who were also voters. In other words: they worked (and I believe they still work, if they work at all) through the use of the tools of the art of rhetoric, ie, through the skills of public speaking, in persuasive and effective discourse. This does not mean that clarity, ordered method in arguing, impeccable and truthful reasoning were always effective, convincing or positive: Demosthenes also points this out more than once in his discourses, when he complains that those attending the assemblies often pay more attention to the empty, angry interventions than to his much more solid and reasonable arguments ("demagogy" is, obviously, another Greek word). In any case, this biographical anecdote from Demosthenes himself comes from when he was still young and learning to speak clearly, walking along the beach with a mouthful of pebbles, whilst attempting to impose his voice over the splash of the waves. Discourse was only effective, then, if it was spoken with a clear, powerful and vibrant voice. This entails, obviously, making all of oral language's tools as effective as possible. Demosthenes, however, did not speak for the sake of it, he spoke to say things (about war and peace, about freedom, about Philip of Macedonia), but he knew that if he did not speak clearly and loudly, he may as well not have spoken at all. Jabbering, swapping and mixing up words are all fundamental errors in the art of rhetoric: trying to say something and not knowing how to express yourself clearly (in terms of spoken, not written, language) means you may as well not say anything at all. People who cannot express themselves clearly cannot have their ideas too clear either. This is the classical basis of rhetoric, which, we must not forget, was also a tool in the Roman republic's judicial system and part of the education of the young in wealthy families from the times of Demosthenes to Saint Augustine, and subsequently, from the 14th and 15th centuries to well into the 20th. Curiously, the sophistry, coming from the Ionic cities of Asia Minor, was by no means incompatible with the great Athenian rhetoric: the sophist (in the "worst" sense of the word, as Socrates, as well as a great speaker, was deemed to be a sophist) may not be searching for the "truth" – if, indeed, such a thing exists – but they do look to dominate, as public speakers, certain skills for discourse. The sophist who teaches how to build an argument also deals with



the persuasiveness of the argument: the intention is always to say something, whether in favour or against the thesis, to prove A or disprove B. Saying nothing is never an option; opinions must always be clear, never confused; blah-blah-blah is not acceptable. This is also true of the Classical tradition.

The orator (a public speaker, someone who knows how to speak well) is, then, one of the ideal models in Europe's cultural and social history, and one of the oldest and most lasting models. Being able to speak in public, in front of an audience (often an expert audience), has been, since the Greeks and Romans, a highly valued human quality. This is not merely the ability to "converse", offer lackadaisical opinions, butt in or play confusedly with the language. The idea is, precisely, to put forward a thesis (ie, a "position": things are this way, because I say so), to methodically set out ideas and facts (ie, "a path from here to there"), to employ the appropriate arguments systematically and with technique (with "art" and with "order"), including *ad hominem* arguments, and, in short, to transmit your thoughts to the listeners, and, where possible, convince them. *Persuasions and Performances* is the title of a magnificent book on "expressive culture" by my good friend, the great anthropologist, James W. Fernandez, which reminds me that "persuasion" is not always the result of a rigorously rational argument following logical lines, but it can also, and often above all else, be the result of a "performance": the art of public speaking – to the extent that it is an art – is based not only, thus, on the tools of what we could call a "scientific" method, but also the more subtle tools of stagecraft. Those who speak monotonously, without expressive inflections in their voice, without the appropriate gesturing (even over the radio gestures can be inferred), without the intonation demanded by the syntax, and, in particular, without being aware that words can be "seen" and heard by listeners. In other words, those who do not perform while speaking often seem not to be speaking at all, as if they were not "transmitting" that which they are saying, not saying anything, as their words reach the audience without any force or life. And this "theatrical" dimension also forms part of the rhetorical tradition. Speaking, then, public speaking, requires not only saying something, but also saying it persuasively. And this art of expression and persuasion, let me remind you, has been one of the most valued and actively influential in the history of Europe. A history which is a history of, among others, lawyers, preachers, teachers and politicians. Not, obviously, of talk show hosts, at least not until very recently. Let us hope that present history does not overshadow what went before.

It was no mere coincidence that democracy and rhetoric should go hand in hand, nor that in the great age of Athens, republican Rome, or the so-called Western countries, (at least since there are, more or less, parliamentary governments and elections, and the like), that the professions of lawyer and politician have often been filled by the same person. If the expressions "philippic" or "catilinarian" have not been relegated to the wastepaper bin of

language (as with those from the book *Hem perdut l'oremus* ['We have lost our bearings'], whose author is both a journalist and professional public speaker), then, surely, only a very few of us remember being taught *Quousque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra, quamdiu etiam furor iste tuus nos eludet*, etc. Cicero speaking before the Roman Senate and Cicero speaking before the tribunals has been for innumerable generations of European students a supreme example of the art of public speaking: the politician defending an ordered republic, enemy of demagoguery and excess, suspicious of the intentions of anyone aspiring to personal power and an advocate of all kinds of causes, defended with impeccable and elegant argument. The style, this was the key: elegance of expression, the beauty of Latin prose and a certain gesture with the arm and the toga, a certain expression in both the gesture and face that comes to mind when we read his discourses. Cicero, as with his predecessor Demosthenes, was a lawyer and politician: ie, an orator, an expert in public speaking and persuading a tribunal or an auditorium, senate or assembly. Being a lawyer, as a professional and public figure (not simply "knowledgeable in the law" as in China or Islam), is a classical and western speciality, and the skills in the art of speaking (both in persuading a jury or convincing a professional tribunal) form part of the baggage involved in the job. These skills are also immensely popular: a good example of this is the current success of American films involving lawyers, attorneys and prosecutors, who act as skilled experts in bringing public speaking to the screen and fascinate audiences around the world. It is true, however, that they never speak for the sake of speaking; they always speak in order to convince.

The other public figure in the field of speaking, the other model of the public speaker, is the preacher. Or it was. Do you know of any famous preacher nowadays? Any "eloquent orator" who was the star turn at all the church's events? The preacher, since the depths of the Middle Ages (Gothic, no doubt, rather than Romanesque: above all from the times of the Mendicants and, aptly, Dominicans: the Order of Preachers), has been an ongoing example of the use of public speaking. Indeed, the impact was much wider and longer lasting than that of lawyers and politicians: sermons have lasted nearly a thousand years in western Europe (Catholic and, subsequently, Protestant), and everyone went, regularly on Sundays and on other occasions to celebrate the most important festivities, Lent, missions and other, more or less, solemn events. And the secular and regular clergy (hundreds of thousands of men throughout time) have received specific training in public speaking, with greater or lesser success and knowledge of theology, but, as well as knowing Latin (and thus having read Cicero, to some extent), they had to know how to speak before an audience. Or at least, they were supposed to, as part of their work as rectors and vicars. Preaching, ie, speaking before the faithful to spread the doctrine, move people or address behavioural problems, has been seen throughout the years as an art, *Ars*



praedicandi populo, as the title of the work by Franciscus Eiximenis puts it. The art of saying things before the congregation, and saying them convincingly; this is the key. The aim is not to have the audience leave the church “*con los pies fríos y la cabeza caliente*” (“with cold feet and a hot head”). The aim is to instil and reinforce convictions, to penetrate the spirit and stir the soul. All this, on the one hand, within the context of the orthodox, ie, with a series of references, beliefs and ideas that are unchanging; and, on the other, in accordance with a regular and studied technique for exposition. The “art” detailed by Eiximenis is the same as that used by Vincent Ferrer, which saw great success throughout half of Europe: before thousands and thousands of listeners in each square and cathedral, but without a microphone or megaphone, without a giant screen or spot-lit stage, without anything, just voice and gesture, the pure word. Knowing what he wanted to say and why, this is true – and the most effective way of saying it. St Vincent, the highest exponent of public preaching, the *crème de la crème* of “communicators”, if we are to judge him on the number of people who came to see him, has left us, fortunately, hundreds of his sermons. His method was unchanging, the skills of the art always the same (threats, inflexions, seductions, texts from the scriptures, descriptive vivacity, interjections, theatre, everything we can imagine and quite a bit more), and his effectiveness seems equally infallible. In any case, whether his was an apocalyptic and “Gothic” preaching, a Renaissance and courtly preaching, Ciceronian, twisted, effected and Baroque sermon, or the colloquial sermon of each Sunday, the aim was always to “say something”, and the desired effect, persuasion. Even if this was not achieved, due to an excess of rhetoric; having listened to the eloquent orator, the faithful could state that “I didn’t understand a word, but didn’t he speak well”. Even this apparent failure shows the greater worth of the art of speaking: the admiration that “speaking well” inspires (or inspired, no doubt, in times gone by). Or that which is seen to be “speaking well” by an audience that is predisposed to appreciate oratory, which for the immense majority, let us remember, was always religious oratory. Only a small proportion of the population, (urban, educated, aristocratic, courtly or bourgeoisie), had the chance on occasions to hear formal and articulate “discourses” which were not some variation or other of the religious sermon; and of this minority, obviously, there was the small world of academia.

Whereas lawyers and preachers have to follow a set order, a method and an art, professors submit the use of public speaking to an even more systematic rigour. It is no coincidence that the development of the art of preaching took place alongside the expansion of scholarly philosophy, nor that the religious orders that have dedicated themselves to preaching (Dominicans, Franciscans, and subsequently Jesuits, to name just the most influential) have been started or grown thanks to an intimate relationship with teaching, colleges and universities. Universities, by the way, are not a Greek or Roman invention, but date to medieval Europe, and the

end product (the human product, the resulting model) was the doctor: which was, not like today – someone who researches a tiny corner of a abstruse field, but someone supremely able to teach, not with a “licence”, but with their own authority. This ability was seen, obviously, in the defence of a thesis; in other words, stating that “this is what I think and I think this on such a question, I think that for such a reason, in contrary to this or that reason, and I am ready to maintain this in debate with any of you here”. *Disputation* is one of the highest forms of public speaking and reasoning, and the medieval universities (and, indeed, in many parts of Europe until very recently) were to a great degree institutions offering advanced education in rhetoric: somewhere where future graduates not only “learned things”, but where they also learned how to express, argue and defend these things they learned. Obviously, they had constant exercises to perfect their ability with this art. Practising debates, in effect, has formed part of the usual curriculum (not only in higher education, but also in secondary education) in all the countries of Europe. The Jesuit schools, dedicated in great part to educating the “leading classes”, or the high schools, *lycées*, colleges and faculties, make students publicly defend an argument, position, idea and debate the subject in opposition to other students, with the reward of prizes, medals and honorific titles. Curiously (or not so curiously, given the way ritual traditions are conserved) the British and North American universities (and many public schools and high schools) have maintained this practice, at least in the form of clubs, associations and public debating competitions. I would like to know how long it has been since the exercise of argued debate has not been taught in this country. I fear that it is not even taught in the journalistic colleges, now awkwardly known as “information science colleges”.

As this, above all, is key: “knowing how to speak”. This was, for generations and generations, one of the qualities required of individuals (and by individuals I mean men, obviously, as for women, the situation was, to say the least, disappointing) to make them complete, from the Greeks to the sons of the industrial bourgeoisie. These, as with their predecessors in schools and universities, were educated for a professional life, which also included a civil life, a social life and a public life. Obviously, this education was only available to the elite and, outside the church, only members of these elites would “know how to speak” in public and to an audience, and a fairly ‘private’ audience made up of members of the same social group; whether in an academic context, an erudite or scientific society, a ‘salon’, tribunal or, even, a parliamentary setting. Likewise, all this changed, or began to change, when the use of public speaking became the centrepiece to the bourgeois revolutions, and subsequently their derivations, the popular and proletarian movements.

The democracy of the masses, which in one way or another, begins with the French Revolution, and continues throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, in Europe and further afield, not only represents increased parliamentary discourse, but also and, above all,



the appearance of a completely new or radically renovated phenomenon: meetings, in auditoria, in the streets and in the squares. This is new in that meetings no longer required people to "speak well" with the tools and references of classical rhetoric (ie, speaking well to a chosen, expert audience), but instead required inspiration of convictions and popular public action, in an audience made up of people who had had no previous contact (apart from the sermon, but this, in a political context, does not carry the same weight) with a language and concepts that had been the preserve of the elite. Convincing and stirring the masses into action at a meeting is not, then, the result of clarity and order in the exposition, nor oratory elegance and precision of ideas: in meetings, disorder and improvisation, direct invective, personal attack, insult or taunt, and, above all, adapting to that which the speaker perceives as the desire and expectation of the audience can be much more effective resources than those of ancient classical rhetoric. This means that the skills required to handle these classical resources (order, rational argument, method, elegance and skill, etc.) are no longer a condition in the exercise of what we could call the "new profession" of politics. Anyone then, without any "technical" preparation can aspire to reach the top and become a leader, (a "leader of the masses" or an "opinion leader", both new concepts), to stir the people up with fiery discourses, to win elections or head political, union or social movements. It should be stressed how the spread of mass democracy (is there any other form of democracy?) coincided with the spread of the 'popular' press and the appearance of two new phenomena or techniques: agitation and propaganda, or together and taken to an extreme, *agitprop*. In this way, in terms of political activity seen or undertaken as a demagogy (but if "demagogy" means stirring or controlling the people, is there any politician that does not employ it?) and any related, whether closely or not, intellectual, journalistic or simply social activity, public discourse has, necessarily, the aim of inciting action (from the pacific and modest action of voting to violent revolution). People can speak saying little and of little use, but still have a successful effect, if the audience is confused and cheated, but actively in favour of the person speaking and against their opponents. On Pericles' death, Athens was addressed by a series of new men who talked of war and catastrophe and who knew how to control the people and the assembly with virulent arguments: men like Cleon, the tanner, Eucrates, the sheep merchant, or Hyperbolus, the lamp maker. This is another ancient tradition, which went dormant for a long time, until it was taken to its extreme in our times: Hitler was, as everyone knows, a painter, (and my apologies to painters).

When political conditions allow (which should be the case) everyone to be able to speak in public in front of everyone else, general confusion is one of the possible, and inevitable, results, (what, with a curious euphemism, is now called "collateral damage"). The right to the freedom of expression also means that both those who know how to and those who do not can speak in pub-

lic. Speaking in public, then, has for some time now not been a "speciality", a recognised art, a technique that had to be learned and employed in accordance with a set of rules and, where possible, in accordance with a form of professional ethics. The public tribunal is no longer reserved for those who have received a special preparation to form a part of it (lawyer, preacher, professor, someone who has read the classics and studied grammar and rhetoric, etc.), but rather, it can include anyone. Beneficial effects are, without doubt, gained, but there are other side effects that are not so positive, with, on occasions, disastrous effects. Indeed, imagine this "freedom" to access the tribunal or pulpit applied, for example, to surgery, architecture or pharmacy. I suppose you understand what I mean, with this inappropriate comparison, but I am not entirely sure.

The problem (let's call it a "problem", although problems are only those things with a possible solution: the Holy Trinity or the squaring of the circle are not problems; and I am now, as you can tell, speaking without saying anything, but only a little bit), the problem, then, is that the spread of the universal right to speak in public (the spread of the right and the spread of the chances to exercise it) has been accompanied by the discrediting or disappearance of the art of "speaking well". The art of rhetoric requires that the speaker take a position, a 'thesis', something, an idea or principle, which has to be set out and expressed in an orderly manner. They need to shape the subject, to return to another classical formula. When the shape is lost, there is the great danger that the subject will also dissolve into nothing. This is not an imagined, but a very real, danger (if you have the patience to listen from time to time, for example – and what an example, to parliamentary debates, such as the 'state of the nation' debates, it will have been obvious to you that in political discourse there is an insalubrious combination of conceptual inanity and an absence of even the most basic elegance of expression). Added to this is the fact that the public tribunal is now, as never before, really and rigorously public and universal. Conferences, chats and round tables have limited audiences and, in general, these audiences are predisposed to value that which they hear (otherwise, they would have stayed at home); a small 'private' audience, an audience of a certain 'quality' for a speaker who has prepared, to a greater or lesser extent, what they have to say (but, oh, how often they say it in a languid monotone!). However, the, let's say, improvised or one-off intervention in the dubious invention that is the radio and television chat show (I have, and I don't know whether this is good or back luck, some experience in this field, though I have much more in conferences given in auditoria) is not only one of the greatest examples of "speaking badly", of the inexistence of subject and form, but it also reaches millions of viewers or listeners who, defenceless and passive, can absorb the inanity, vacuousness, styleless intemperance, stilted language without syntax, whilst they take in unfounded judgements, prejudices, the slander that takes the place left vacant by the lack of



ideas, and other low quality offerings that they so often produce (few of these chat shows escape these problems; a few, but not many). Indeed, it is this formless form of public speaking which, ironically, seems to reach the widest audience and which influences most, insidiously, in the spread and triumph of that perversion of reason that is prejudice (whatever it may be: as long as it is a judgement without form, or approval or condemnation without ordered reasoning). Of all the deplorable effects of the loss of the art of speaking well, this is one of the worst. If the very idea of rhetoric seems laughable and out of date, we should remember that

it gave rise to democratic debate, where this way of life was invented. We should take some time to reflect on the fact, (at least it seems to me to be a fact, and not a vacuous hypothesis), that the universal and insistent spread of this public speaking that lacks any ordered form, style, reasoning, and divine or human grace could be an insidious factor in the corruption of the very substance on which democratic life is founded. If in the beginning it was the *logos*, ie, the word and reasoning, and the end is the dreadful defeat of this *logos*, then I don't know if we are closer to chaos than we are to a habitable world.

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