

Full Circle Departure

Around 95 CE, Roman rhetorician Quintilian published his *Instituto Oratorio*. In this text, among many other topics, he discussed forensic rhetoric and outlined two components of it. There was the part that related directly to the main case and the part that departed from the main case. The latter part he coined as *digressio*. He defined it as a departure “from the main subject” while remaining “pertinent and useful to the case” to serve the purpose of “praise” or “censure, or for adornment, or to charm, or to prepare for something that follows”¹. While originating in forensic rhetoric, *digressio* can be a very powerful tool outside of the courtroom, in everyday life, as well as in today’s politics.

During a court case, the main question could be whether or not an accused committed murder. The opposing sides would engage in a *digressio*, discussing the accused’s past and possible history with the law, their connection to the deceased, substantial evidence, and so on. While this information doesn’t directly answer the question as to whether or not the person committed the crime, it is pertinent in building the case and providing more information so a verdict can be determined.

At the beginning, rhetoricians established rules to ensure a *digressio* was strictly used to embellish dialogue and make the main claim stronger or provide more details. Henry Peachum outlined these rules in *The Garden of Eloquence*. If they are not upheld, Peachum argued, it can create a fractured and incomplete dialogue, retracting from the main cause. First, the *digressio* must amplify the conversation and pertain to the matter at hand. Second, the *digressio* must be at an appropriate time, with the entrance to it being at a suitable part in the dialogue and likewise with the return to the main case. Finally and most important, a *digressio* “must not darken our main cause.”² By this, he means that a *digressio* can’t spend too much time apart from the main purpose and can’t stray as far off as to leave the realm of the matter at hand. Similarly, it can’t overthwart the topic and create confusion by making a false connection between ideas and causes. If these rules are employed, a *digressio* can make an argument more powerful, a story more immersive, and an oration more personal.

Currently, the term *digressio* is no longer used and has evolved to “digression.” Much like the word itself, the definition and use has also been altered in the present day. Originally, *digressio* was a rhetorical device seen as a way to garnish oration or discussions, but in recent times digression has adopted a more negative connotation and is often a shard in the flow of dialogue. Common synonyms for digression include deviation, diversion, departure. These words all provide an idea that you depart with no course of action or a desire to return.

While the connotation of the synonyms may be negative, there are still plenty occasions where the original principles of *digressio* are retained and practiced. In court today, for the most part the original values are upheld, or at least they’re supposed to be. We’ll often see digressions in political debates or speeches as a means of reinforcing their message or argument. When trying to make an argument to pass a bill, a speaker will often utilize a digression to explain their personal relationship with the topic and possible effects it has had on them in an attempt to show how deeply they care for it. This can persuade some people who are still undecided on the topic

¹ Arrington, Phillip. “A Most Copious Digression: An Erasmusian Analysis of the Rhetoric of Virginia Woolf’s Comments on Letters in Jacob’s Room.” *College Literature*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2018, pp. 543–566., doi:10.1353/lit.2018.0030.

² Ibid.

and create a sense of faith that the speaker will actually pursue their argument. In these scenarios, the original values are upheld.

However, we often see the misuse of a digression to achieve different goals. This is common in debate formats where a direct question is being asked. An example can be seen in a recent vice presidential debate when Vice President Pence was asked whether or not he would want his home state to ban all abortion if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned. He responded “well thank you for the question, but I’ll use a little bit of my time to respond to the important issue before.”³ Pence goes on to add negative remarks about Vice President Biden regarding his stance on the decision to execute Soleimani and discusses the supreme court while also commenting negative remarks about Senator Harris, never returning to the main case or answering the question at hand.

He completely disregarded all the original rules for a digression, but was still able to achieve exactly what he wanted. Through his misuse, he was able to run out of time so that he didn’t have to answer the question directly and was able to add to his overarching argument—that you should not vote for Biden. While the original principles of a digression may be used on some occasions, we can see that the current idea of the use has been altered and now can achieve different goals than solely to embellish an argument or dialogue.

As time goes on, the misuse of the tool to achieve desired outcomes will be more common. The meaning of *digressio*, much like the word itself, has evolved and is no longer as limited as early rhetoricians intended. The reason for this, I believe, is that a *digressio* is much more fluid and multifaceted than they realized. As seen in the example with Mike Pence, he was able to use a digression to avoid a question he didn’t want to answer, add negative remarks about his opponent, and benefit his overarching argument.

Digressions aren’t only limited to the scope of politics and courts. In the majority of everyday conversations, digressions are utilized and the original values are more commonly upheld. People don’t realize it, but within a conversation, short stories and personal anecdotes are digressions. They depart from the main case and add more details and meaning to make the oration stronger. Without these digressions, everyday conversations would be pretty bland.

Throughout history, the use of *digressio* has grown beyond what rhetoricians initially intended. It now acts as a tool not only to enhance dialogue and build an argument, but it also provides an opportunity to create confusion, interject negative remarks, and elicit an emotional response. While it does retain some resemblance of the original values, in the future, I believe these new values will be amplified and the misuse of the term will become more evident. While Quintilian and original rhetoricians may view this term as being corrupted, like everything in life, to survive it must evolve and adapt to today’s societal needs.

³ “Vice Presidential Debate: Full Video - CNN Video.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 8 Oct. 2020, www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/10/07/vice-presidential-debate-full-video-2020-dbx-vpx.cnn.

Works Cited

Arrington, Phillip. "A Most Copious Digression: An Erasmusian Analysis of the Rhetoric of Virginia Woolf's Comments on Letters in Jacob's Room." *College Literature*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2018, p 554., doi:10.1353/lit.2018.0030.

Peachum, Henry. "Henry Peachum., The Garden of Eloquence (1593): Schemas." *Perseus Digital Library*, 1977,
www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.03.0096%3Apart%3DSchemates+Rhetorical%3Asubpart%3DThe+third+order%3Asection%3DAmplification%3Asubsection%3DDigressio.

Quintilian. "Quintilian, Instituto Oratorio." *Perseus Digital Library*,
perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=LatinAugust2012.

"Vice Presidential Debate: Full Video - CNN Video." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 8 Oct. 2020,
www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/10/07/vice-presidential-debate-full-video-2020-dbx-vpx.cnn.