CHAPTER SIX

DEMOSTHENES

Unlike the compositions of Thucydides, Plato and indeed Isocrates, which were detached from specific situational contexts, the orations of Demosthenes were designed to have an effect on the here and now, as integrative parts of the concrete decision-making that characterized political institutions. The texts we have by him are documents of the actual oratory of the rhetor speaking in front of the Assembly on the particular issues of the day.\(^1\) It follows that practical references predominate in the speech: we do not expect an orator, immersed in his role and in the political arena, to dwell on theoretical considerations, which would only retard the deliberative process. Nonetheless, in Demosthenes’ argumentative and persuasive strategy, the priority given to the questions on the order of the day does often yield to instructions on how the rhetor should speak and how his audience, the demos, should listen and decide.

Only sixteen—or more exactly thirteen—demegoric speeches\(^2\) have come down to us in their entirety; most of Demosthenes’ speeches to the Assembly are known to us as partial elaborations in the 56 Prooimia.\(^3\) He himself stated that on most occasions he spoke with only parts of his speech prepared: according to a famous anecdote related by Plutarch, when Pitea reproved him for the excessive odor of the oil lamp, i.e. for the fact that his speeches had been written down first, Demosthenes replied that his speeches were neither altogether unwritten, nor yet fully written out (οὔτε γράψας οὔτ᾽ ἄγραφα κομιδῇ λέγειν).\(^4\) As L. Canfora has suggested, the collection of Prooimia may conserve precisely what, in Plutarch’s

\(^1\) There was much discussion of the destination of Demosthenes’ demegoric speeches in the form in which they have come down to us. For an overview of the different positions see Canfora (1995) 19 ff. Now there is a certain consensus to consider them as a more or less authentic transcription of actual speeches, albeit reworked in view of publication; thus Canfora; cf. also Yunis (1996) 238 ff.

\(^2\) Cf. supra chap. 1.1.

\(^3\) The denomination προοίμια (Prooimia), recorded in the manuscript tradition, is actually inexact: the extent of some texts indicates that they constituted by a no means inconsiderable section of actual demegoric speeches and not merely the introductions, prooemia; see Clavaud (1974) 5 ff.; Canfora (1995) 28–29. On the authenticity of the προοίμια cf. Yunis (1996) 287–289.

\(^4\) Plut. Dem. 8.5.
account, constituted the parts of the speeches he had written down. In them Demosthenes could tackle the more general topics, leaving the specific questions to the often unpredictable way in which a particular session of the assembly evolved. In the Prooimia the reflection focuses on the most important aspects of democratic deliberation, i.e. the role of the counselor (σύμβουλος), the behavior of the demos gathered in the assembly, and the function of the speech being delivered.

In Prooimion 11 Demosthenes dwells on the modalities that have to be respected to ensure a correct and effective deliberation (εὐβουλία):

"I think you all know, men of Athens, that you have not come here today to judge criminals but to deliberate about the present state of affairs. So it is our duty to leave aside all the accusations and only when we put someone on trial should this or that man speak before you against another who, he has convinced himself, is an offender. But if anyone has something profitable or advantageous to say, now is the time to declare it. For accusation is for those who have fault to find with past actions, but advising is about present and future actions. Therefore the present is no occasion for abuse or blame but for advice, it seems to me. For this reason I shall try to guard against falling myself into the error which I condemn in these men and to offer the advice that I think best in the present situation."

Here Demosthenes outlines the deliberative debate, clearly distinguishing it from the judicial debate, much as Diodotus had done in the third book of Thucydides’ History. The distinction emerges progressively through