

Bruce McComiskey:

*Gorgias and the New Sophistic Rhetoric*

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Bruce McComiskey's instructive book is a tribute to as well as a contribution to the (neo)-sophistic revival that has been thriving in various American academic circles since the 1970s. In the Introduction (pp. 1-13), following a brief discussion of ancient perceptions and concepts of the sophist(s), the author presents and comments on two seminal articles by John Poulakos and Edward Schiappa. McComiskey then proceeds to elaborate his own theoretical matrix which is based on the works of, e.g., Schiappa, Stephen Makin, and Michel de Certeau. The key concepts are historical reconstruction, rational reconstruction, and neosophistic appropriation, of which the latter is McComiskey's primary concern. It may be objected that in this connection McComiskey is to a certain degree stating the obvious, and that there is also some name-dropping going on, not only in the Introduction but also in the remaining parts of the book. (For the purposes of the study, one could actually have done without Foucault, Popper, and Said, to name only a few. However, it comes as a relief to find that, for once, there is no parading of Nietzsche.) McComiskey's style is generally clear and unpretentious, and it is thus easy to follow him, even when he goes into complex matters. He can say important things in a simple manner: "The fundamental difference between historical interpretation and neosophistic appropriation is this: in historical interpretation writers impose (consciously or not) modern frameworks on the past, and in neosophistic appropriation writers search the past for contributions to modern theoretical problems and problematics" (p. 10). The sophists, then, are our field: McComiskey concentrates on the towering figure of Gorgias.

In Part One (pp. 15-52) McComiskey engages in historical interpretation, arguing in favour of a conception of Gorgianic rhetoric that is very different from Plato's. McComiskey is concerned, in Chapter 1, with "Disassembling Plato's Critique of Rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (447a-466a)". He argues that Plato misrepresents Gorgias's epistemology as foundational by making his Gorgias character agree to three strategic binary oppositions: briefly, those between *epistêmê/mathêsis* and *doxa/pistis*, between *didachê* and *peithô*, and between *logos* and *pragma*. But, McComiskey objects, "Gorgias the sophist would not have accepted any of Socrates's three claims about rhetoric because his relativistic epistemology could not support their three corresponding binary oppositions" (p. 31). In the *Gorgias*, "Plato misrepresents the Leontinian sophist as having a foundational epistemology while retaining Gorgias's *kairos*-governed methodology, making him appear contradictory and absurd" (p. 18). McComiskey is not the first to come to the rescue of the Gorgias of the *Gorgias*, who received less than fair treatment by Plato and Socrates. McComiskey's discussion is well worth reading. However, it suffers somewhat from the fact that it serves as an "internal" critique of the argument conducted in the relevant part of the dialogue, while at the same time being informed by what we know about the historical Gorgias from extant texts. Those texts are in fact McComiskey's main focus of interest.

Chapter 2 is devoted to "Gorgias and the Art of Rhetoric", presenting what McComiskey claims to be a detailed and holistic reading of Gorgias's works, *On Non-Existence* (or *On Nature*), the *Encomium of Helen*, and the *Defense of Palamedes*. It is good to see these works taken seriously, and it is interesting to have them treated together. In *On Non-Existence*, which

many take as just a piece of fun, Gorgias is here said to offer no less than “a nascent social constructionist view of language” (p. 34). McComiskey makes a good case for his reading of the text in a rhetorical perspective, but there certainly remains much more to be said about it as a contribution to philosophy (cf., e.g., H.-J. Newiger, *Untersuchungen zu Gorgias’ Schrift Über das Nichtseiende*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973). I am less happy with McComiskey’s treatment of *Helen*. The introductory claim of this work, namely that the virtue of *logos* is truth (*alêtheia*), McComiskey takes as referring simply to sincerity of speech. In the same vein he argues that Gorgias here establishes “a relativistic foundation of situational truth upon which to base his art of rhetoric”, thus making Gorgias a champion of truth and not of *doxa* (p. 47). However, the comparison between Aristotelian *topoi* and “topoi” in *Palamedes* is quite illuminating and very welcome, considering the fact that so (relatively) little has been written about this text. Nevertheless, in my view McComiskey claims too much for Gorgias’s three texts, not only for each work considered separately, but for the three of them read as “a coherent whole” (p. 34). Whereas *On Non-Existence* allegedly “clears the ontological and epistemological grounds, consisting of realities outside of mortal control and their effects on humans, for a general theory of ways human beings move others to action” (p. 38), *Helen* is said to be a treatise on the *negative* uses of rhetoric as *peithô*, and *Palamedes* an example of the positive uses of rhetoric as a tool for inventing ethical arguments (ibid.) The interpretation of the *Helen* I find particularly problematic, since it is based *inter alia* on the idea that “the human arts that Gorgias considers to be the most powerful in the service of *peithô* are *bia*, *logos*, and *eros*” (p. 41). McComiskey’s discussion is interesting, but it has not convinced me that, for Gorgias, force and love are “arts”.

Part Two, “Neosophistic Appropriation” (pp. 53-117) deals with the recent past. In Chapter 3 McComiskey explores “three theoretical and pedagogical sites where neosophists appropriate sophistic doctrines to solve contemporary problems in composition and rhetorical studies” (p. 58). First, there is the (re)introduction in American scholarship (from the 1960s onwards) of the theory of rhetoric’s epistemic relativism as a new way of looking at the role of language in the formation of human knowledge. According to McComiskey, the advocates of this relativism were heavily indebted to the sophists in general and to Gorgias in particular. Thus, Michael Leff and Robert L. Scott made “sweeping appropriations of sophistic epistemologies in the service of articulating a new epistemic rhetoric” (p. 63), while other scholars developed, for example, the Gorgianic notion of *kairos*. Second, in the realms of poststructuralism, pragmatism, and public discourse neosophists find “affinities between sophistic *rhetorical* traditions and modern *philosophical* traditions” (p. 66). The major figures of this theoretical site are Jasper Neel and Sharon Crowley, with Derrida looming in the background. Third, we have the “feminist and third sophistic”. In one of McComiskey’s ample quotations, Susan Jarratt tells us that “though the sophists may not be ‘feminists,’ current feminists are becoming sophists in the best sense of the word by describing rhetorical solutions to the crucial problems of defining a theory with the most power for changing women’s lives” (p. 73). Furthermore, McComiskey presents Victor Vitanza’s “third sophistic” as a “postmodern sophistic critical attitude” that, in Vitanza’s own words, “would be, or *is* an “art” of “resisting and disrupting” the available means (that is, the cultural codes) that allow for persuasion and identification” (p. 75).

In Chapter 4 McComiskey leaves the issue of self-conscious appropriation turning instead to what he calls “postmodern sophistic” and arguing that contemporary postmodern critical theory is sophistic in terms of its epistemic foundations and characteristic rhetorical strategies. Certain postmodern concepts, so he maintains, “bear remarkable resemblances to fifth-century BCE Gorgianic concepts” (p. 81). The major postmodern sophists in question are Kenneth Burke, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Derrida. McComiskey’s manner of presenting for example the key concept of representation in the works of the modern thinkers is very helpful, the presentation is richly furnished with characteristic quotations, and the exposition is concise. He concludes that

“[a]lthough Gorgias and the postmodern sophists are separated by nearly twenty-five hundred years, and the contexts that gave rise to their writings are indeed different, their descriptions of how language derives meaning are remarkably similar” (p. 89). Here, one is tempted to ask: So what? In the final section of chapter 4, McComiskey discusses what he terms “Graffiti Immemorial Discourse” and sees as a form of “Postmodern Epideictic Rhetoric” (pp. 89-96). Departing from Stephen Greenblatt’s assertion that the epideictic genre is a received collective practice, but that “the social conditions of this practice – both the circumstances that make the genre possible and the objects that the genre represents – may change in such a way as to undermine the form” (p. 89), McComiskey finds that “epideictic rhetoric has ‘traveled,’ Edward Said would say, into postmodernity, but we have not yet theorized its new character or its new function in postmodern culture” (p. 90). Quoting Takis Polakos’ insight that classical epideictic rhetoric “discloses the capacity that participants of a society have to become social agents by articulating their own versions of the social order” (p. 91), McComiskey moreover asserts that “[p]ostmodern epideictic rhetoric, like sophistic epideictic rhetoric, is graffiti, because its signs derive meaning as much from their sociotextual contexts as from their referential content; and, like sophistic epideictic rhetoric, postmodern epideictic rhetoric is *immemorial* because its primary goal is to subvert dominant-class hegemonic discourse” (p. 93). His further claim, that “[i]n postmodern epideictic rhetoric, graffiti signs comprise inter(con)textually saturated graph(it)ic signifiers (graphic manifestations of graffiti immemorial discourse) at subversive play within host socio-textual contexts that infuse graph(it)ic signifiers with semantic energies” (p. 94), is supported by quotations from Lyotard and Derrida.

Chapter 5, “The Global Village, Multiculturalism, and the Functions of Sophistic Rhetoric”, confronts us with political realities and challenges us to practice critical multiculturalism, with a view to seizing the right moment (*kairos*). As in the Introduction, McComiskey once again makes good use of key concepts from the works of Michel de Certeau.

I take it that the sophistic revival is not only an academic project, but a pedagogical and political one as well. But what, then, constitutes Gorgias’s (and the other sophists’) contribution to this? Chapters 4-6 of McComiskey’s book deal with what we may call modes of thought and intellectual attitudes that somehow resemble what can be found in Gorgias (and other sophists). McComiskey claims no more. Whatever similarities we may find, they tend to stand out because of the distance in time and the difference in circumstances between Classical Greece and the (post)modern world. Even though the pointing out of such similarities may be interesting in itself, I believe that it would have been more of a challenge to work out the differences in what appear to be similarities: the same is no longer the same if the context changes. Chapter 3 deals with “neosophists” who explicitly appropriate ancient sophistic doctrines, and McComiskey talks about both “influence” and “inspiration” from classical Athens (p. 76). Being a classicist, I find much of interest here. I assume that readers who define themselves as (primarily) neosophists will also find much to engage them in chapters 1 and 2, which treat both the *Gorgias* and Gorgias in – what I would define as – a neosophistic perspective.

All translations from Gorgias are by the author. I have no quarrel with them. There are, however, a few other, minor blemishes: Socrates was not tried by Miletus (p. 20) but by Meletus; and the Greek word for reasoning is not *logismon* (p. 30), but *logismos*. That “Homer describes Alexander with several epithets using *aristos* (most noble in appearance) as a common thread” (p. 42) is on several accounts false; it does not make sense to speak of “Alexander’s *aristos*” (ibid.); and the quotation in Greek type on page 94 comes out messy. Finally, for the sentence at the end of note 2 on p. 139 to make sense, “Peloponnesian” must be read instead of “Persian”. The book is handsomely produced.

As an Appendix we are offered “A Selected Bibliography on Sophistic Rhetoric and Philosophy” (pp. 121-137). The first biographical section introduces the reader to collections of “Primary Sources”, where pride of place is given to Diels-Kranz’s edition of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, whose publisher is cited as Wiedmann (but correctly as Weidmann in the final list of “Works Cited”). To say that the Greek texts of the pre-Socratic philosophers and the sophists that are found in Diels-Kranz are “untranslated” (p. 122), is somewhat misleading. What Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz considered to be the *ipsissima verba* of the philosophers – admittedly often a tiny part of the sources and testimonia presented in the edition – are in fact given in German translation. On the other hand, this is not the case even for the ‘surviving’ works of Gorgias, which, according to Diels and Kranz, have come down to us only after others had been tampering with them (if only slightly). Thus, for all practical Gorgianic purposes there is indeed no translation in Diels-Kranz.

The next section of the bibliography, “The Sophists in General” (pp. 122-124), contains a reasonable selection of titles (some 35 works). However, it is hard to see why Bowersock’s *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* appears on the list, since the second sophistic is of no relevance to McComiskey. The section on “Particular Sophists” (pp. 124-131) is predictably particularly focused on Gorgias. I would have thought that Douglas MacDowell’s excellent little edition of the *Encomium of Helen* with translation and commentary (1983, with later reprints) would have deserved inclusion. It could also have been mentioned that George A. Kennedy’s translation of that work, originally a contribution to Sprague 1972, has appeared in revised form as “Appendix A 1” in Kennedy’s translation from 1991 of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (listed among the “Works Cited” only). In the Appendix there follows a section on “Neosophistic Rhetoric and Philosophy” (pp. 131-134), and, finally, a “Miscellaneous” section (pp. 134-135) that does not include Vickers’s *In Defence of Rhetoric* (1988), despite its extended criticism of Plato’s *Gorgias*.

McComiskey should be commended for offering such a useful and well-organised bibliography, the limitations of which are clearly stated by the author himself (pp. 121-122): With three exceptions the bibliography includes no titles from before 1900; it includes nothing in the way of conference proceedings and *Festschriften* (with one exception); there is no mention of “[t]hose numerous sources that treat the sophists solely as Plato presents them in his dialogues”, whoever these sources may be; and above all, the bibliography only includes books in English – nothing in German or French, not to mention Italian. One therefore looks in vain for classic scholarly works such as H. Gomperz’s *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (1912), from which there is still much to be learned, and Barbara Cassin’s large scale *L’effet Sophistique* (1995).

In the list of “Works Cited” (pp. 143-149), translations of Aeschylus and Hesiod appear alongside Benjamin and Adorno (name-dropped twice, on pages 92 and 117, for the sake of a banal truth that was already elegantly stated by Ovid). It is not as if McComiskey is unfamiliar with ancient and foreign literature; we shall just have to accept that in the academic village, English is hegemonic.

Øivind Andersen  
Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas  
University of Oslo  
P.O. Box 1020 Blindern  
N-0315 Oslo  
NORWAY  
Oivind.andersen@ifikk.uio.no

Øivind Andersen is Professor of Classics at the University of Oslo. His main fields of research are Homer and rhetoric. His translation into Norwegian of Plato’s *Gorgias* will be published in 2006.