Isocrates and the Epistemic Return: Individual and Community in Classical and Modern Rhetoric

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In two discourses written a decade apart, Isocrates starkly opposes individual and community and leaves no apparent room for compromise:

I have come before you to give my counsels on the war against the barbarians and on concord among ourselves. I am, in truth, not unaware that many of those who have claimed to be sophists have rushed upon this theme, but I hope to rise so far superior to them that it will seem as if no word had even been spoken by my rivals upon this subject. (Panegyricus 3 [c. 380 BC])

For I think it manifest to all that foreknowledge of future events is not vouchsafed to our human nature, but that we are so far removed from this prescience that Homer, who has been conceded the highest reputation for wisdom, has pictured even the gods as at times debating among themselves about the future. (Against the Sophist 2 [c. 390 BC]; in keeping with general practice, references to Isocrates' works are by paragraph number.)

In the first passage Isocrates endorses the “anthropocentric worldview” (Vitanza 51) and casts his opponents (who happen, in this instance, to be Lysias and Gorgias) to the outer wastes of silence and darkness. He espouses the ideology of individualism, and if we oppose this ideology, as we must, it is because in it we detect the rhetoric which transforms private knowledge into public truth and behind which stand the oppressive forces James Berlin has described as “inherently and debilitatingly divisive of political protest” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 491). In the passage from Panegyricus, then, Isocrates must be judged profoundly anti-democratic. He narrows the field of discourse to an elite few who control meaning and reality; in Susan C. Jarratt’s words, he “works against a sense of community both in the classroom and outside” (88).

In the second passage, which comes from the advertisement/manifesto Isocrates wrote for his new school, the anthropocentric worldview is shrouded in doubt. Isocrates now endorses, it seems, a democratic pedagogy consistent with positions taken by contemporary epistemic rhetoricians, of which John Poulakos' defense of sophistic emancipatory discourse is exemplary: “The
liberation of discourse entails exposing the motives and ways of the established order, critiquing social convention, and demystifying the tradition" (101). Behind the passage we can detect neo-pragmatic views of language that go with the social construction of knowledge: Isocrates posits alternate sites of discourse production in which boundaries between individual and community constantly shift, paving the way for "a deep appreciation of the social, political, economic, and technical realities in terms of which individuals develop and which make different kinds of individuality possible" (Crosswhite 93).

If the Isocratean orator is expected to speak in a world where knowledge is always uncertain, the philosophical implications would point to a tension between the individual's desire to bring knowledge and discourse to closure and the community's desire to open discourse to a wider field of participation. Kate Ronald has written that rhetoric "from its beginnings [which predate Isocrates] worked in the tension between individual and social concerns" (38). As studies by Werner Jaeger, and, more recently, Nicole Loraux, Philip Brook Manville, and Josiah Ober show, rhetoric developed in Athens as part of a "struggle between mass and elite conceptions and images" of ideology and its expression (40; see Loraux 330-37). Isocrates exploited this struggle through what I will call in this essay an "epistemic return," my phrase for what Dionysius of Halicarnasus saw in Isocrates as a turning "away from treatises on dialectics and natural philosophy" to a concentration "on writing political discourses and on political science itself" (105). For Isocrates the uncertainty of knowledge, predator of both polis and orator, made all the more imperative the orator's leadership in persuading the polis to accept the wiser course of action. Hence, Isocrates stresses the orator's intellectual gifts, vouchsafed by nature only to a few, to manage "the situational aspects of rhetoric" (Cahn 129) which cannot be taught. The first of these gifts is kairos, reductively "the gift of proper timing" (Cahn 129), but derived from an earlier sense of harmony in opposites which endowed it with "distinctly ethical connotations" (Carter 101). The second is prepon, "the non-rational, inexplicable intuition of adequacy and propriety" (Cahn 129), whose own ethical connotations refer to the orator's embodiment of the felt, but seldom articulated, public ideology. To these intellectual gifts is added cultivation of a literary prose style with a power to invest doxa, the expression of uncertain opinion, with the force of certain knowledge, episteme.

Isocrates' orator thus inhabits a space with room enough to make a claim for private knowledge. The ethical connotations of kairos and prepon, however, necessarily position the orator within the community which adjudicates knowledge claims in what we recognize as a distinctly epistemic environment (Vitanza 41-2; Carter 98). Thus (re)-positioned, the orator works, in Ronald's words, "the spaces between personal and public life" (37) and is "moved beyond pragmatics or civics toward a sense of ethos that involve[s] personal responsibility for language and for audience" (38). By
turning rhetoric away from speculative philosophy to politics, Isocrates converted speech into an epistemic enterprise by which public discourse conceived, debated, and determined reality: "Generally speaking," he wrote in the Antidosis, "there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish" (254).

At the end of this essay, I want to discuss an epistemic return I detect in contemporary studies of rhetoric. As I hope to suggest, its dominant concern, as it was for Isocrates, is to reconfigure the relationship between individual and community within an epistemic environment that encourages the individual's participation in the social construction of knowledge but at the same time grants the individual the space within which to convert cognitive insights into discourse. Isocrates is the harder nut to crack, for his ideal orator is an elitist whose own working space seems to place him in opposition to the community. I think this misrepresents the general drift of Isocrates' rhetorical theory, and so I discuss three aspects of his theory that help define the public ethos of the orator: the place of Isocrates' rhetorical theory in the history of oratory in Athens, his own ideas of history, and his prose style which embodies an epistemic consciousness of the ethical relationship that exists between writer and reader. When I take up the contemporary epistemic return, I will confine myself mainly to pedagogy: the classroom as the site where students are empowered to write themselves within the larger community.

Tension at the Source: Mass Versus Elite in Athens' Oratorical Culture
Mass and elite, terms Josiah Ober uses to describe the fundamental structure of Athenian society, were set in opposition almost from the beginning of the democracy. According to Ober, when Solon was appointed archon in 594 BC, one of his first official acts was to redefine citizenship in terms of economic status. For the elite, wealth was a prerequisite for membership in political institutions and thus the salient credential for wielding political power. For the masses, the elimination of the debt-bondage made it possible for even the poorest Athenian male to call himself a citizen, although his political power amounted to virtually nothing (Ober 60-62). As Ober points out, any citizen could sit in the Assembly, but only the elite could hold a position in the Areopagus, the primary judicial institution in Athens, and thereby "control any independent tendencies that might be manifested by the citizenry in the Assembly" (64). This relationship between mass and elite changed, however, when Cleisthenes was returned to the archonship on the backs of a popular uprising against Pisistratus and the Spartan occupation (510-508 BC). The masses collected their due by exerting pressure on Cleisthenes to institute what Ober calls a "politics of consensus" in which citizenship was redefined to denote political equality regardless of economic status (69-70). The masses' newly-found political clout was particularly evident in the institution of ostracism, by which a vote of the Assembly could exile a dissident citizen
for a period of ten years. Although ostracism suppressed individual dissent by threatening literal marginalization for a good portion of a citizen's life, it was also the natural byproduct of the "assertion of collective responsibility for decisions that could not be enforced by external authority" (Ober 73). If ostracism implied a tyranny of the community over the individual, however, it also opened the way for the mid fourth-century reform of isegoria. Under isegoria, debate and dissent were encouraged as essential to political action, with a consequent rise in the importance of public speaking skills which the sophists, who were beginning to make their appearance at this time, were quick to capitalize on (Ober 78-79). Though elite and mass remained as vestigial categories, democracy had broadened as far as it would before the onset of the Peloponnesian Wars; citizenship, however, was still restricted, and would remain so until the end of the democracy, to native-born males.

Isocrates picked up this tradition when he opened his school in Athens around 390 BC. His pedagogy and the rhetorical theory it articulated drew extensively from a culture which valued speech as both a practical and philosophical necessity. Indeed, philosophy was the essence of culture, and he defined philosophy as the fitting of knowledge to the practical needs of the polis:

I hold that man to be wise who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course, and I hold that man to be a philosopher who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight. (Antidosis 271)

It was precisely philosophy in this sense that Isocrates hoped to preserve by returning rhetoric to its political roots. As he saw it, Athens had fallen into political ruin and moral decay, and a leading cause of the decline was a polis whose hostility to the individual with "powers of conjecture" only seemed to widen the gulf between mass and elite. Citizens now "looked upon insolence as democracy, lawlessness as liberty, impudence of speech as equality, and license to do what they pleased as happiness" (Areopagiticus 20). The orator who argued from this premise, as Isocrates often did, was already at a disadvantage. Powers of conjecture, enhanced by the successful application of kairos and prepon, were indispensable, but how was the orator to effect the political change needed without also widening the gulf between his status as a member of the elite and the democratic impulses of the masses?

Isocrates' solution to the dilemma is problematic. His anti-democratic sentiments can no more be ignored than Athens' own anti-democratic exclusion of women, slaves, and foreigners from citizenship (Ober 6), and his sentiments are seldom stronger than in his condemnation of the masses' usurpation of elite prerogatives to serve its own selfish ends. It is an aspect of Isocrates' thinking which can be assimilated, uneasily if at all, into contemporary rhetorical studies only so long as his epistemological skepticism accompanies it. The two very nearly cancel one another out, but in another sense they are decisive oppositions within Isocrates' own ideological
framework that developed in response to Athens' decline during the post-war decades. The moral lassitude he equated with runaway democracy had grown too widespread to be corrected either by the technical training supplied by the sophists or by the cloistered idealism of Plato and his followers. Plato was, in fact, so far as Isocrates was concerned, an irrelevancy. His curriculum did not make students “a whit advanced in their ability to speak and deliberate on affairs” (*Antidosis* 267), and in a passage which mimics the ironic voice of Plato’s “praise” of Isocrates in the *Phaedrus* (278-79), and which turns this praise back on its original maker, Isocrates advises “young men to spend some time on these disciplines, but not to allow their minds to be dried up by these barren subtleties” (*Antidosis* 267-68). Athens had no use for barren subtleties if it was to regain the political leadership over all Hellas it had enjoyed in the Persian wars. For Isocrates, philosophy was a theory of political culture, the study of the moral foundations of political stability, and above all the use of discourse to resolve political conflict in a world that provided no final answers. For this reason, Jaeger suggests:

It was rhetoric, and not philosophy in the Platonic sense, that seemed to Isocrates to be the intellectual form which could best express the political and ethical ideas of his age, and make them part of the intellectual equipment of all contemporary Athenians. (50)

Isocrates did share with Plato, although from a great distance, one key part of an individualistic ideology, and that was his belief that only a few orators were gifted with the natural ability to convert *doxa* into the wisdom necessary to govern the state. The ancestors of these orators were the leaders of the old democracy who had risen to prominence on the strength of their merits, had dispensed justice to “every man according to his deserts,” and had understood equality to mean “that which gives to each man his due,” not “that which makes the same award to all alike” (*Areopagiticus* 21-22). Isocrates surely romanticized the Athens of Solon and Cleisthenes, and in so doing betrayed some of the traits of nostalgia Christopher Lasch identifies with the “abdication of memory”: the longing for an idealized, non-existent past to replace the decadent, all-too-real present (82-119). Isocrates yearned for the political system of old, when the few wisely governed the contented many. Only the individual naturally endowed with a gifted mind and a gift for speech could attenuate, if not eliminate, the tragedy of the uncertainty of knowledge and produce the discourse essential to the reformation of the state. Ober’s description of the *rhetor* as a publicly recognized “expert orator/politician” (105) who combined rare intellect with keen public-speaking skills has many of the attributes found in the Isocratean orator:

The successful orator was one who could consistently and seamlessly combine ideas drawn from mass ideology with moral principles and pragmatism in presenting a workable policy, a defense of his policy, or an attack on the policy of an opponent. (124)
Naturally, the *rhetor* had to take into account the weight of public opinion, the final authority in determining the epistemic validity of *doxa*. To Kathleen Welch the "cornerstones of Isocratean rhetoric are the utilitarian appeals to many aspects of the listener or reader and an emphasis on values" (123), a combination which, in Erika Rummel's words, places Isocrates "[m]idway between the philosopher's arguments and the layman's objections" (25). His rhetoric, Rummel goes on to say, "demands a mixture of epistemological theories, literary preferences, moral principles and practical considerations" (25). Welch and Rummel underscore a divided epistemology in Isocrates in which the elitist pretensions of the individual are absorbed into the pragmatic interests of the community. In Isocrates' thinking, communal pragmatism serves as a disciplining force in the orator's public life, much as style serves as the orator's outward sign of inward wisdom. Isocrates seldom misses an opportunity to align the orator's *ethos* with collective interest, as when, for example, he rejects the proposal that Athens and Sparta share the hegemony in favor of the counterproposal that Athens alone deserves the hegemony, on the grounds that the latter argument "may show who they are that stand in the way of the Hellenes" (*Panegyricus* 16-20). And it is this alignment which allows him also to convert the advantage gained by the orator from delivering a good speech into a benefit for the polis at large (*Antidosis* 275-76).

*Ethos, History, and Ideology*

The themes which run throughout Isocrates' political discourses—the cultural superiority of Athens, its proper place at the head of a revitalized panhellenic union, and the call to arms against the Persian "barbarians"—are products of his own historical consciousness as it was shaped by what he saw as Athens' post-war descent into political anarchy. Whenever he turns to Athenian history, as he often does, it is with the ideological stance of one who sees himself in lonely opposition to the groundswell of public opinion which passes itself off as prevailing wisdom. He finds history a rich field of argument for the policies he advocates, and the ethical question, as always with Isocrates, is whether the ideological imperative to reconstruct history works against the interests of his audience. History, and especially the use of history, cannot exist within a neutral *ethos*; facts are value-laden, ideological touchstones which tell us how Isocrates, by assuming the role of ideal orator, plays the epistemic tension in his own writings to fortify his arguments in support of Athens' right to the hegemony.

If the rhetorical situation determines how history is to be used, then the orator is already working in the epistemic environment that poses both the greatest danger and greatest opportunity. For even as the orator seeks a disconnection from the public by playing the elitist who knows the truth, the orator at the same time rebuilds the connection by turning over the task of decision making to the public. In *On the Peace* he expresses it in these terms:
"people of intelligence" who have knowledge of some matter have no need of counsel, but "act as men who are already resolved what to do," whereas those who take counsel should not "think that they have exact knowledge of what the result will be" and so can only "exercise their best judgment" (8).

A single example will suffice to illustrate how Isocrates uses Athenian history to build a public ethos within the ideological framework from which to construct his major themes. In Panegyricus (54-56), written about 380 BC, and in Panathenaicus (168-71), written about 342, he gives two different versions of the same mythic story: the victory of Thebes over Adrastus and the famous Seven, the crowning humiliation coming when Creon forbids Adrastus from recovering the bodies of his slain comrades. In both versions Adrastus appeals to Athens for help in lifting Creon’s ban, but Isocrates describes the resolution of conflict in radically different terms. In Panegyricus, written when the memory of Thebes’ alliance with Sparta against Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars was still fresh in his mind, Isocrates implies that Thebes submitted to Athenian military force. In Panathenaicus, written when Thebes and Athens were negotiating an alliance against Philip II, the Thebans are depicted as deliberating among themselves before granting Adrastus’ suit.

Isocrates admits in the Panathenaicus to giving a version different from the earlier, but he calls upon his audience to commend his “discretion” and “wise and expedient” discourse (172). To Rummel, this indicates Isocrates’ “belief that ideas and arguments are right if they are appropriate, that their value is relative to a given situation and that a rhetorical composition must be judged on this basis” (27). Although this very nearly amounts to an "anything goes" ethos—history, as Vitanza puts it, as “the product of human imagination” (55)—for Isocrates the uncertainty of human knowledge does stretch back into the dimly-remembered past, not only forward into the undisclosed future, and much of what we call history is imagined, if not fashioned from whole cloth, and erected on the shaky foundation of the little we actually know or think we know. If we rewrite history to suit a present rhetorical situation, we acknowledge that facts are meaningless without a context and that we supply the context to give facts rhetorical validity. In a brilliant article on Isocrates’ use of history, C. Bradford Welles shows how Isocrates conflated the historian’s virtue, which “was to tell the truth,” with the orator’s virtue, which was “to convince people” (13). Though Welles, with Rummel, finds in Isocrates that “history is what you make of it in a particular situation” (14), Welles also shows that for Isocrates historical evidence, what we may reasonably believe from past testimony actually to have happened (Panathenaicus 149; Philip 33; Helen 22), was ignored by the orator at his own peril. Given the policy aims of a political speech, and the role of the polis to which it was addressed, probabilities alone were not sufficient to make a case; the orator “needed or at least had to consider facts, exempla” (Welles 13). But events of the past also, to serve any useful
purpose, must be dressed with the immediacy of purpose which only rhetoric supplies. In advancing this claim, Isocrates makes it clear that while the facts of history are there to be picked up to serve a specific rhetorical purpose, their meaning is invented to achieve conviction, \textit{kairos} and \textit{prepon} functioning within an ethical environment to convert the past into a meaningful present:

For the deeds of the past are, indeed, an inheritance common to us all; but the ability to make proper use of them at the appropriate time, to conceive the right sentiments about them in each instance, and to set them forth in finished phrase, is the peculiar gift of the wise. (\textit{Panegyricus} 9)

Isocrates was bent on returning rhetoric to politics because he could see in Athens’ floundering political fortunes, no less than in Plato’s program for correcting them, an end to history and of an interest in history and thus an end to discourse. None of these consequences seemed, to him, to satisfy the ethical calling of the orator. In the \textit{Antidosis}, a mock legal defense that serves as his philosophical \textit{apologia}, \textit{ethos} is a constant underlying principle that governs the orator’s relation with the polis: “Men of wisdom ought to concern themselves both for the interests of our city and for the interests of Hellas, but should give preference to the broader and worthier cause . . .” (80). The uncertainty of knowledge serves as a philosophical check on hegemonic impulses, assuring that \textit{kairos} and \textit{prepon} remain tied to a communal \textit{ethos} so that true advantage comes only to those orators “who are most conscientious in their dealings with their associates, whether in their homes or in public life, and are themselves esteemed as the noblest among their fellows” (282). By applying these principles to the use of history in argument, as Isocrates does here in the \textit{Areopagiticus}, the orator constructs the \textit{ethos} which binds his vision of the past to the necessities of the present:

Whoever, therefore, knowing that such great vicissitudes have taken place and that such mighty powers [Athens and Sparta] have been so quickly brought to naught, yet trusts in our present circumstances, is all too foolish, especially since Athens is now in a much less favourable condition than she was at that time. . . . (8)

The orator is virtuous when conviction is secured on a foundation of truth that must be validated by the public’s shared involvement in the historical process.

\textbf{Writing and the Ethics of Style}

I would like to touch on one other locus of epistemic tension in Isocrates’ rhetorical theory, and that is the literary prose style he inherited from Gorgias and is generally credited with fashioning into an aural/aesthetic phenomenon rigidly kept within the bounds of the rounded period (see Cicero, \textit{Brutus} 33-4; Jebb 54 ff). My focus, however, is on Isocrates’ \textit{written} style and on his use of writing as an epistemic tool to shape an \textit{ethos} within which both personal and public can work. Most estimations of his style
generally side with Cicero, who noted that in the typical Isocratean period “language runs on as if enclosed in a circle until it comes to an end with each phrase complete and perfect” (Orator 207). By rounding off the expression of thought, the period effectively closes off any possible response by the audience, producing the peculiar “double benefit” Jebb described as “the thought which illumines and the speech which charms and touches” (45). But if we look at Isocrates’ style within the context of his theory of writing, we gain, I think, a much clearer picture of the orator’s access to the inherently epistemic resources of writing that Jasper Neel has defined under the rubric “sophistic” (307-08): writing as the play of always contested and always united opposites, a thought’s very presence predicating its own absence through the implied presence of the other: precisely the ethical conditions underwriting a style for expressing kairos and prepon.

In a remarkable essay “Isocrates the Beautiful,” Ronna Burger finds in both Plato and Isocrates a shared critique of the fallen state of Athenian politics and thus a shared conviction that writing must be saved to carry out the philosophical business of educating the polity. Isocrates and Plato also shared much the same attitude, for much the same reasons, toward writing. In his letter To Philip, for example, Isocrates echoes some of the arguments of Plato’s Phaedrus by noting that written discourses “are composed for display and personal gain” and that they lack the “advantages of timeliness and keen interest in the subject matter” (25-26)—that is, of kairos and prepon. Burger finds that Isocrates, no less than Plato, must therefore defend his art of writing “through the implications concealed in a written condemnation of the written word” (“Isocrates the Beautiful” 121).

But Isocrates and Plato part company, as Burger notes, when it comes to defending an art of philosophy that can be carried out in the written word. Isocrates seeks a broad context for philosophy by shaping it within the written text for the political education of the citizen; Plato adapts philosophy for the narrower purpose of building private knowledge through the practice of spoken dialectics (“Isocrates the Beautiful” 116). For Isocrates, writing is a philosophical art when it bridges the gap between orator and polis, and he defends it, Burger argues, for “its capacity to encourage, through persuasion, the virtue of moderation, hence its ability to realize the goal of rhetoric as the necessary mediation between the phronesis of the philosopher and the practice of men of action in the political world” (Plato’s “Phaedrus” 107). Burger effectively places Isocrates on the side of the sophists, who deny the possibility that our actions can be validated by external authority and insist that “we must invent them contingently as we go along” (Berlin, “Freirean Pedagogy” 415). But Isocrates also parts company with the sophists on one crucial point: their own metaphysical aminadversions on the nature of Being—an object of their passions no less than of Plato’s—are part of that juvenile fascination Isocrates identifies with “vain speculations and all activities which have no bearing on our lives” (Antidosis 268-69). If the
epistemic return is to save rhetoric for use in contingent political actions which do bear directly on our lives, it will necessarily bring philosophy with it. "The intention of the rhetorical art in providing the model for this virtue [of moderation]," Burger says, "is identical with the political intentions of philosophy" ("Isocrates the Beautiful" 117).

Isocrates' condemnation of writing in The Philip deserves a second look, however, for Burger is only partly correct in suggesting that he instructs Philip to read his written words for an argument that speech is better than writing ("Isocrates the Beautiful" 121). Isocrates does tell Philip that the faults of writing "may detract most seriously also from this discourse" (27), but the context of Isocrates' examination of these faults serves the larger purpose of instructing Philip in an epistemic way of reading to overcome them. He tells Philip not to be "prejudiced and turn away from the rest of my discourse," but to "wait with an open mind until you hear to the end all that I have to say" (24). As Philip reads he should take up the facts "one by one in your thought and scrutinize them, not making it a casual task, nor one to be attacked in a spirit of indifference, but with the close reasoning and love of knowledge which it is common report that you also share" (29). To make Philip's task easier, Isocrates admits that "I have not adorned it with the rhythmic flow and manifold graces which I myself employed when I was younger" (27). (The letter was written c. 346, when Isocrates was in his nineties; he died four years later.)

Although To Philip is a model of periodic restraint, it is not so restrained as Isocrates lets on. Balanced antithesis is the dominant periodic form, and here it manifests a decentered epistemic consciousness needed to promote Philip's creative reading task. Indeed, given the rhetorical aim he sets for himself, which is to balance the interests of Philip with the interests of Athens, Isocrates works carefully back and forth between arguments which favor both parties, "maintaining," as he says, "that both you and the Athenians were mistaken about the real state of affairs, and that you were fighting in support of our interests, and our city in support of your power" (3). Frequently, for example, sentences turn from one thought to its antithesis. Many of these sentences begin with words or phrases—"as," "nevertheless," "but although"—which introduce a subordinate member and thus announce a turn to come in the argument. Such a structure delays the main clause until the second or later member of the period and thus forces Philip to withhold judgment at least until he has finished the period he is reading. In a study of several Greek historians, Stephen Usher shows that subordination and coordination were usually manipulated to stimulate emotional or intellectual responses (369-70). Isocrates is clearly after the latter, but he does not overlook the former. If the flow and graces of his earlier style had made his oratory "more pleasing and at the same time more convincing" (To Philip 27), the situation in which he now finds himself requires him to argue his case without offending his reader, for Philip has just successfully concluded ten
years of war with Athens (356-346 BC), has taken the Athenian colonies at Amphipolis and Potidaea, and is on the march south.

Using his characteristic tropes of balance and antithesis, Isocrates constructs an *ethos* in *To Philip* to propound claims that his reader, a king in his ascendancy, will regard as no different from his own. The same tropes support other facets of the epistemic consciousness, and one of the more typical in Isocrates is the movement through levels of structure as a means of laying out the mind’s progress toward understanding. In this passage, he is recalling Athens’ leadership in the Persian wars:

> For when the greatest of all wars broke out and a multitude of dangers presented themselves at one and the same time, when our enemies regarded themselves as irresistible because of their numbers and our allies thought themselves endowed with courage which could not be excelled, we outdid them both, surpassing each in the way appropriate to each. (*Panegyricus* 71)

Structure works here at two levels. Grammatically, the passage moves through two balanced members (“For when . . .” and “when our enemies . . .”) and three qualifiers (“at one and the same time,” “because of their numbers,” “which could not be excelled”) and ends at closure (“we outdid them both”) which is itself qualified to denote finality (“surpassing each . . .”). Stylistically, it replicates the private mental processes which lead to the conclusion, capturing, as it were, the idea at the moment of its conception. Inasmuch as the period’s grammatical structure guides the reader inexorably toward a claim which resists refutation, its style allows the reader to engage the writer at every point in the progress toward closure, with the possibility that at any point the reader may challenge the writer’s argument.

Aristotle noted another quality in Isocrates’ preference for balanced periods:

> Such a form of speech is satisfying, because the significance of contrasted ideas is easily felt, especially when they are put side by side, and also because it has the effect of a logical argument; it is by putting two opposing conclusions side by side that you can prove one of them false. (*Rhetoric* 1410a 20-23)

Aristotle is drawing on his own bias for the use of opposed theses as a means of contrasting the true and the false (see *Rhetoric* 1355a 21-33). In actual practice, however, Isocrates rarely uses opposed theses to set the true against the false; nor does he always employ them in the manner of Protagoras’ *dissoi logoi*: two contradictory theses, neither of which can be demonstrated as true or false (see Jarratt, 49-53). More often Isocrates uses balance as a jumping-off point for a style that truly opens thought outward, breaking free of the controlling influence balance can exert on the reading process, as in this passage from *On the Peace*:

> We who fall so far short of those who lived in those days both in our deeds and in our thoughts that, whereas they brought themselves to abandon their country for the sake of saving other Hellenes and fought and conquered the barbarians both on the land and on
the sea, we do not see fit to run any risk even for our own advantage; on the contrary, although we seek to rule over all men, we are not willing to take the field ourselves, and although we undertake to wage war upon, one might almost say, the whole world, we do not train ourselves for war but employ instead vagabonds, deserters, and fugitives who have thronged together here in consequence of other misdemeanors, who, whenever others offer them higher pay, will follow their leadership against us. (43-45)

Dionysius of Halicarnasus complained of this period that "the drooping folds might have been pinned up more neatly" (see Jebb 63). The passage does demand a close, attentive reading (and re-reading) to sort through the twists and turns of thought. Isocrates does himself little favor; he departs from the pleasure/conviction standard he gave in To Philip, for long drooping folds are reader-unfriendly and make the task of discernment difficult beyond the expected reward. On the other hand, Isocrates was committed enough to his belief in natural ability to demand from readers as much as he demanded from orators: an intellectual investment in ideas to shape the ethos of a text whose persuasive force as doxa calls upon the reader to endow it with the conviction of episteme.

If, as Rummel suggests, style "occupied a lower rank in the hierarchy of Isocrates' criteria than content and subject matter" (30), then Isocrates' style serves ornamental purposes, possibly to the detriment of his argument. The passages I have discussed above suggest otherwise. Beyond any other virtues an epistemic style may possess, it is the outward manifestation of the orator's interior struggle to convert an idea into a meaningful statement. It is the display of imagination turning insight into knowledge. Its epistemic value lies in its capacity to bridge the gap between private musing and public expression. In discussing the connection between personal and public rhetoric, Kate Ronald argues "that classical pedagogy was fundamentally concerned with the student's mind at work, and the student's ability to see rhetoric as a way of learning, thinking, and acting in the world" (38). In a passage from the Antidosis Isocrates articulates this very concern: the writing process brings the writer into contact with the public world, and crucial to the success of the project is an eloquence that gives meaning and coherence to the writer's thought:

With this faculty [of discourse] we both contend against others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown; for the same arguments which we use in persuading others when we speak in public, we employ also when we deliberate in our own thoughts; and, while we call eloquent those who are able to speak before a crowd, we regard as sage those who most skillfully debate their problems in their own minds. (256-57)

This is one of the most important passages in Isocrates, for it brings within the thematic scope of ethos a number of diverse issues that adumbrate the relationship between individual and community: knowledge is uncertain; the individual has a private space, the mind musing within itself, to work out a coherent episteme; private episteme is meaningless—it means nothing—if it
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is separated from the community which holds the power of granting epistemological validity; style is the individual's means of persuading the community of the rightness, both temporal and substantive, of his claims; writing, finally, is the philosophical art which serves both the individual's private struggle to make meaning and the community's public responsibility to act upon it.

The Epistemic Return in Modern Rhetoric

I would like to venture in these final pages a brief description of the epistemic return in modern rhetoric. It attempts, as Isocrates did, to revalorize the individual as meaning-maker. Contemporary sources for this attempt are not very hard to find; the expressivist pedagogies of Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, and the cognitive acts pedagogies of Linda Flower and John Hayes are frequently cited. Both pedagogies have come under attack from Susan Jarratt, Patricia Bizzell, James Berlin and others for being blind to the political implications of self expression (Jarratt 90-91). Worse yet, self-expression is seen as a contradiction in terms: the individual, deluded by a belief in self-mastery, expresses the codes of a dominant and oppressive culture, thereby reinforcing that culture's control over the social order. Elbow, for his part, has defended a role for expressivism within the "Democracy Through Language" theme of the English Coalition Conference of 1987, and I think he means to emphasize that students are entitled to think and write independent of any institutional constraints, if for no other purpose than to put their words into their texts rather than the words supplied by anyone else. As Elbow explains,

The consensus was around a vision of what education must be if we are to make thoughtful citizens who are not prey to propaganda by what is authoritative or seduction by what is sincere or glossy... What children need to become good citizens is the ability to interpret, question, and evaluate information rather than just passively receive a list of terms or concepts—to be producers of knowledge rather than just consumers. (32)

That a student's text may, in fact, be culturally, historically, ideologically, politically situated is part of the project of self-discovery that Elbow, and his colleagues at the conference, see as crucial to the education of the American student. (It is crucial to Elbow's book as well: see his Appendix D, "Situating Me," 260-66.) Significantly, Elbow's discussion of the "remarkable consensus" around the conference's theme (15-30) reads almost as an updated but more inclusive version of Isocrates' rhetorical theory: there are no barbarians in the Coalition's schoolhouse and no room for such a concept in its pedagogy.

Still, the situational aspect of rhetoric, which is central to any notion of social epistemic rhetoric, raises the philosophical question of the individual's place relative to community when it is taken for granted that reality—assuming it exists—is unknowable or—assuming it does not exist—is rhetorically
constituted and so knowable only in discourse. Several recent critiques of epistemic rhetoric have addressed this question. Daniel Royer, for example, finds that epistemic rhetoric rejects the Kantian concept of *noumena*, the real but unknowable thing-in-itself, but keeps the Kantian *phenomena*, the symbolic representation of the thing which constitutes its reality (285). Under the influence of this Neo-Kantian split we are “active participants in the formation of knowledge” (284), and “reality is a product of our own symbol making, cognitive processes. Hence, there is no reason to believe there is any reality independent of man as symbol-making knower” (287). Royer rejects this position, however, because it comes too close to an expressivist rhetoric in which writing is “an endless yet futile search for final coherence in a text” (288). In its place he proposes a “New Realism” that goes “beyond ‘objectivism and relativism’” and posits “some kind of unity between the objective and subjective, between appearance and reality” (293). New Realism suggests a tectonically unstable showdown between, say, objectivist positivism and the “possible worlds” of Nelson Goodman and Jerome Bruner: “Though [new realists] insist there is a reliable core of objective knowledge, they temper this claim by recognizing all human knowledge is fallible” (Royer 294).

Jeffery Bineham critiques epistemic rhetoric for reducing epistemology to two antithetical choices, the poles of the “Cartesian Anxiety”:

The assumption that only two options are available for those who inquire into matters of knowledge and action: *either* some ultimate ground for knowledge and action exists, some objective and ahistorical foundation against which claims to know can be measured and the utility of actions ascertained, *or* we are beset by relativistic skepticism and are unable to speak of knowledge or “justified” action in any meaningful sense. (44)

The choice, in other words, is between reactionary foundationalism or radical skepticism. Bineham’s review of the four major positions taken by epistemic rhetoricians—objectivism, critical rationalism, social knowledge, and consensus—leads him to prefer the consensus position, by which we understand epistemic rhetoric under its familiar definition: rhetoric as a way of knowing. Rhetoric exerts a powerful social influence; it is the means by which interpretation becomes knowledge; it is the community’s rationale for the social construction of reality: “The ‘validity’ of knowledge and truth clearly hinges on the presence or absence of a rhetorically created consensus among a community of significant others” (53). A voice from the radical skeptical position, however, can be heard cautioning us that consensus “determined by classical and modern categories or ‘techne,’ unwittingly begins and ends as a tool for social exploitation and psychic repression” (Vitanza 49).

What is the connection between philosophy and pedagogy, particularly in the classroom that becomes, as James Berlin puts it, the “main institutional site for resisting [the] notion” that education is the depositing of a
culture's authoritative knowledge into the minds of naive, easily-indoctrinated students ("Freirean Pedagogy" 416)? Berlin represents one important phase of the modern epistemic return by describing rhetorical education in these terms: "Against the argument that writing is a matter of skills and drills, or self expression, or privatized cognitive act, social epistemic rhetorics of various hues are arguing that writing is a public and communal enactment of a political interaction" (416). Isocrates fits uneasily into the social epistemic paradigm, for as we have seen he does give credence to private cognitive acts. But I do not think that Berlin and Isocrates are too far apart, for Berlin also recognizes that students who write (or who are taught to write) within a social epistemic paradigm enact political interactions in terms of their own experiences. According to Berlin, students are "asked to locate and address the conflicts and contradictions they find in their own social and political experience, presenting in their essays an account of this engagement" (416).

Does this mean that students are required to give up their individuality, are absorbed against their will into a dominant communal ideology they may not like or understand? This is, of course, one of the principal lines of attack the political right employs whenever it goes after "leftist" academics (read: English teachers) who enforce "politically-correct" standards for everything from diction to ideas. It is little comfort that the right grossly (and deliberately) misconstrues the way we ourselves are trying to work out a comprehensive rhetoric that positions the individual within community but does not assert a dominant ideology to which the student must always silently defer. As Patricia Bizzell writes, "We must help our students... to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate... knowledge and beliefs to displace the repressive ideologies an unjust social order would prescribe" (670). The contemporary epistemic return focuses, as it did for Isocrates, on politics, though the difference may now be that more emphasis is given to promoting self-awareness of one's situatedness as a prelude to joining the wider community where the respect for difference includes a respect for others' situatedness. If we keep in mind that engagement is something that individuals do (as we do in writing our own essays under our own names for dissemination to our peers), then the act of displacement Bizzell refers to does not require silence from the student: in fact, quite the opposite.

The contemporary epistemic return is also manifested in a mildly reactionary critique of the tendency in communal ideology to suppress the individual student and thereby threaten any meaningful concept of community. Maxine Hairston, writing recently in College Composition and Communication, cites the politicization of the classroom and asks, "Why has the cultural left suddenly claimed writing courses as their political territory?" (183). As Hairston sees it, the politicized classroom makes the individual the enemy of the community, and thus she quotes David Bleich and Dale Bauer as among those who "show open contempt for their students' values, preferences, or interests" (181):
The ideal of the nuclear family, as opposed to the extended or communal family, permits the overvaluation of the individual child and the individual soul (Bleich 167; qtd. in Hairston 182).

In teaching identification and teaching feminism, I overcome a vehement insistence on pluralistic relativism or on individualism (Bauer 389; qtd. in Hairston 182).

My attention is drawn in these quotes to the words I have put in italics. I see them as significant gestures toward a rapprochement of individual and community which still meets the pedagogical (and, yes, political) aims of the authors. An overvaluation of the individual is not implied in Elbow's promotion of the individual as knowledge producer; nor does it point the way toward a complete de-valuation of the individual. Somewhere between pluralistic relativism and overvalued individualism there exists that space Kate Ronald describes as the site where the personal and public construct the ethos so essential to a successful social epistemic rhetoric.

It is an unwelcome possibility to face, but we as writing teachers may exert less influence on our students' ideologies than their engineering or business or science professors. Yet, we maintain the effort in the hope that we can awaken them to a world of wider meanings, decenter them into a universe of difference, and liberate them from the oppressive racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies which, like baying hounds, herd them into our classrooms. We know too well that students who resist challenge can make it through college secure in knowing that they and their job-oriented degrees will be welcomed with open arms into the dominant culture, but not knowing (or caring) that this culture will co-opt and reinforce their ideologies with easy credit terms for cars, houses, high-tech entertainment systems, and—painful to admit—the women in their lives. We teach with the conviction that our students come to us with words and thoughts already supplied by religious, political, and cultural givens they had no part in making, and are forbidden to question. Like the child Annie Dillard, who once dug a dime out of the dirt of an alley and embarked on a life of excavation, our students, we believe, should get off the boulevard and away from the light of the familiar and poke about the strange, dark, and forbidden. And it is a fine balancing act we perform: emancipate the individual from the oppressive ideologies of an unjust social order, but do not reinforce the ideology of individualism which the forces of oppression prize so highly and feed on so voraciously.

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Works Cited


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