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The Birth of Neopragmatist Literary Studies from the Spirit of Ancient Sophistry

When "The Contemporary Sophist", a scorchingly critical essay by Roger Kimball, appeared in *The New Criterion* in 1989, it was still possible to dismiss his assault on the leading American neopragmatists, and all sorts of postmodernists, as being wide of the mark.¹ Kimball accused Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish of having no respect for truth and knowledge; particularly Fish received a lot of flak for being a champion of rhetoric and an irresponsible relativist. However, when fifteen years later, in 2004, the SUNY Press published a collection of essays concerned with Fish's views (often critical but altogether bearing all the markings of a classical *Festschrift*), the title on its cover left no doubts as to the genealogy of those views, at least in the eyes of the collection's editors - *Postmodern Sophistry: Stanley Fish and the Critical Enterprise*. Several months later I had the honor to receive a copy of the book straight from its protagonist; he did not seem nonplussed by the title. In a long, engaging conversation, Fish refused to divorce his critical position from his interest in rhetoric, and he acknowledged with pride an affinity between his views and those held by the Older Sophists.

Richard Rorty, another major target of Kimball's criticism, never exhibited any clear symptoms of a keen interest in the Presocratics' views, and yet many aspects of his philosophical position may be traced back almost directly to the Sophists' texts and commentaries on their outlook. Sophistic inspirations inform his skeptical attitude to the entire project of Platonic philosophy, his fascination with literature (especially the novel) as an alternative to the philosophical discourse, his critique of epistemology, and, finally, Rorty's notion of truth, explicitly borrowed from William James's position on the issue. Some of those themes also figure

prominently in Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp's essay "Against Theory" (published in 1982), which constitutes a vehement and unrelenting attack on theory construed as a normative discourse in relation to literary studies, and to interpretation in particular. Alongside Steven Mailloux's contributions concerned directly with the legacy of ancient sophistry, those themes amount to a powerful and challenging presence of what I elsewhere described as a neosophistic pragmatism in the contemporary humanities.ⁱⁱ Here, I want to focus on specific parallels between the latter-day pragmatists' views and those held by the Older Sophists in order to justify the claim implied by my title.

I want to begin with a conjunction which is best illustrated by Stanley Fish's writings from the 1980's and early 1990's. What he combines there is a commitment to rhetoric with a markedly pragmatist angle on interpretive practice, and a skeptical attitude to the pretensions of theory and other methodological principles which aspire to impose on the interpreter a predetermined mode of looking at the text. As far as Fish's rejection of theory is concerned, his position is contiguous with that of Michaels and Knapp, who are often taken to have introduced a pragmatist perspective into literary studies. At the very least, they have given voice to a radical stance within the discipline of English which stipulates that all attempts to impose a theoretical framework on individual interpretations of particular literary works should be abandoned, as they (i.e. the attempts) are invariably doomed to fail. Michaels and Knapp's distrust of theory stems from their doubts about the role of philosophy as a source of methodological guidance for all the other human sciences. Instead, the neopragmatists turn their attention to rhetoric.

Thereby, though indirectly, they also turn their attention to the IV c. BC when a clash of views occurred between Plato and the Sophists. By the time Plato defined his position on the function and essence of knowledge, the Greek city-states had welcomed quite a numerous population of itinerant teachers known as the sophists. They specialized in tutoring young, well-to-do men who wished to pursue a political or judicial career.

The Sophists were not concerned with philosophy in the modern sense of the word. Their knowledge was markedly utilitarian, and they construed it as a *techne* in the first place, that is, a skill, a craft or an art. They emphasized the practical pay-off of the education they offered; not infrequently, it was to serve as a means of gaining recognition and acclaim as well as political clout (e.g. in the democratic Athens under Pericles). Quite possibly, it was the Sophists who inspired the modern mode of thinking about education as a commodity, since they demanded steep tuition fee for their instruction.ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout my discussion of the Greek Sophists, I refer principally to two major figures whose significance derives on the one hand from their extant works or their fragments and, on the other, from the amount of commentary and references which abound mostly in Plato's and Aristotle's writings. Those two figures are Protagoras of Abdera and Gorgias of Leontini. Also, I enlarge on a key distinction which is usually credited to Antiphon the Sophist, therefore his name also deserves a mention at this point. Out of a plethora of insightful works concerned with the Sophists, I rely mostly on W.K.C. Guthrie's *The Sophists*, published in 1971 by Cambridge University Press, and a very interesting and challenging study of Protagoras by Edward Schiappa entitled *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*.^{iv} Also, for their views on rhetoric, I consult one of the few available first-hand sources which come directly from the Sophists – Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, a speech which focuses on the persuasive dimension of discourse.

Before we take a closer look at rhetoric, however, I would like to explore some interesting ramifications of a maxim by Protagoras. His terse slogan "Man is the measure of all things", often abbreviated to *anthropos metron*, is a perfect illustration of the Sophists' humanism, since it assumes that the touchstone of our behavior (that is, how we are going to be judged) rests with other people and the consequences it may have for them. The focus on man, rather than, as in Plato's case, on wisdom, truth or the supreme realm of ideas, distinguishes the Sophists from

metaphysical philosophers and transforms knowledge into an instrument for subordinating, or at least mollifying, their social and natural environment. Of course, an echo of that focus may be found in William James's and John Dewey's views as well as in their intellectual scions'. Probably the most notable among those scions is Richard Rorty, who insists, in most of his writings, that epistemology, construed as an effort to discover the true nature and meaning of the world, is a gross misunderstanding.^v Consequently, the humanism advocated by contemporary pragmatists is best defined by their stipulation that our actions serve other human beings, rather than some abstract concepts and notions, no matter whether or not they bear the respectable name of Truth.

Another consequence of their humanism is that both the Sophists and the pragmatists are committed empiricists. That is reflected, among other things, in their dislike of systemic thinking, constructing theoretical models and identifying rules detached from any specific context. On that account, they are often charged with professing epistemological relativism, which the pragmatists share with the Sophists who used to apply a human, that is, fluctuating and subjective, measure to all things and actions. In recent years, the charge of relativism has been a stock-in-trade in any assault on Rorty's and Fish's positions. They both declare themselves as staunch antifoundationalists^{vi} and antiessentialists, which, in Fish's case, manifests itself in his rejection of the formalist approach to the interpretation of meaning in literary and legal texts.

Formalists claim that the text is an objectively verifiable carrier of meaning, and the meaning may be discovered by analyzing the text's linguistic structure. All one has to do is practice close reading, peruse the words on the page, establish what they contain, and then communicate one's findings to the world at large. A procedure like that, so the formalist argument goes, is fail-safe, as it is sure to produce the correct interpretation of meaning, no matter who, and under what circumstances, is doing the interpreting. In other words, the formalists believe that

extratextual factors do not affect the meaning of a literary text (or any other text, for that matter). Meaning is its immanent quality; in this sense, it exists independently of human beings.

Stanley Fish was probably the first literary scholar to openly challenge that key formalist assumption. In an essay published in the early 1970's ("Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics"), he defines meaning along completely new and subversive lines, as an event which takes place exclusively in the reader's presence; moreover, it requires the reader to participate actively in the meaning's emergence.^{vii} In Fish's view, meaning does not come into being until the reader's consciousness infuses it into the black marks on a white sheet of paper. Although Fish soon abandoned his conception of affective stylistics, he has continued to stand by his claim that meaning is always relative to a given situation and the context of our interpretive expectations, needs and intentions in which we place an utterance. To paraphrase Protagoras, we may conclude that man is the measure of the meaning of a text.

Rorty's and Fish's antifoundationalism owes much to another significant aspect of the Sophists' views, best expressed by Antiphon, who insisted that such notions as justice and morality belong to the realm of *nomos*. Therefore, in contrast with *physis*, they are human inventions, based on an agreement within a community of people on what are the limits of socially acceptable behavior and what constitutes a breach of law or a transgression of those limits.^{viii} The law established by a given community is not an emanation of any universal, incontrovertible notion of justice, because only the laws of nature are possessed of such attributes. Most institutions and social procedures, whose origins have long been forgotten, are cultural constructs, as modern sociologists have it, rather than a historical necessity determined by some intelligent design from high above. This aspect of the Sophists' views has been particularly warmly received by postmodern philosophers and writers, e.g. Michel Foucault whose works constitute a perfect illustration of the historically contingent and mutable shape of our civilization.

Foucault's historicist and constructionist position has close affinities with the neopragmatists' views. Stanley Fish expresses them particularly clearly through his notion of interpretive communities. Following his antiformalist manifesto in the early 1970's, he realized that every interpretation is in need of norms and constraints even though they might be socially constructed rather than discovered in a natural state. While studying the responses given to texts by empirical readers, Fish stumbled over a problem with dismissing those interpretations which were obviously wrong. Therefore, he concluded that a criterion for correct readings was indispensable. Rather than seek for immanent criteria in the text itself, or immutable principles outside it, Fish identified them with what may be described as a *sensus communis*, a common point of view shared by the members of a given community. Thereby the definition of the distinction between acceptable interpretations and misinterpretations is at the discretion of readers, provided they can reach a consensus over the issue (and in most cases they do). Decisions taken by the community become the law; they soon acquire the status of unquestionable norms, and thus individual members of the community, in their day-to-day transactions, are never paralyzed by the awareness of the contingent and arbitrary quality of their social reality.

Another major family resemblance that obtains between the New Pragmatists and the Sophists is connected with their attitude to knowledge. Before Plato's times it took the most radical shape in Gorgias's lost work, *On Nature or the Non-Existent*. There, the sophist proffers his notorious trilemma, which is also commonly identified as one of the earliest expressions of nihilism. It posits the impossibility of knowing anything (although, according to Gorgias, it is doubtful whether anything exists in the first place), and even if knowledge of anything is available to us, we shall never be able to communicate it to others. Protagoras, in turn, tries to moderate Gorgias's stance by claiming that there are always two opposing arguments (or discourses) on every issue. The claim, known under the Greek name of *dissoi logoi* (literally, different words, or two

ways of arguing), appears to have been one of the most pregnant sophistic contributions. Its authorship has been ascribed to Protagoras by some later commentators such as Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius, who enlarges on the sophist in Book 10 of his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.^{ix} Coupled with a relativistic approach to truth, Protagoras's claim contains the seeds of a philosophical position which led Richard Rorty, two and a half millennia later, to call into question the very foundations of epistemology.

The *Dissoi logoi* by Protagoras is also a harbinger of epistemological pluralism (e.g. in interpretation) and it anticipates fallibilism which is characteristic of many pragmatists' approach to the status of science and knowledge. Placed in a broader context, the conclusion of Protagoras's work about two different discourses which may be produced on a given issue not only ushers in a healthy skepticism but also paves the way for democracy in its present form. Such notions as public debate, argument culture and the art of persuasion (rather than coercion) clearly owe their existence to sophistic inspirations. It is rather difficult to say how his friendship with Pericles affected Protagoras's views, but it is beyond reasonable doubt that the skills of registering and appreciating other people's standpoints and opinions, which he used to instill in his students, have prevented many conflicts from escalating.

In science, the sophists' views made an impact on Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of knowledge. His fallibilism may be seen as a direct consequence of the claim that most scientific conclusions can never be ultimately verified. Peirce's argument implies that science keeps changing its shape, and its progress often undermines long-held dogmas, therefore our knowledge should be regarded as probabilistic. The more evidence for a given theory we accumulate, the more likely it is that the theory is true. Ultimate certainty, however, may prove impossible to reach. We should always assume to be fallible and yet spare no effort to make our results achieve an optimal approximation of the actual state of affairs. Eventually, in practice, it does not really matter whether our actions are premised on

conclusions which are absolutely incontrovertible (Peirce does not think these are possible) or only highly probable.

It is fair to acknowledge that the Sophists did not concern themselves with science as such, therefore it is virtually impossible to prove that Peirce borrowed inspiration for his views directly from them. What they were certainly interested in were art, literature and oratory. But the notion that they have most often been associated with is rhetoric, which was their major bone of contention with Plato. To rhetoric, Plato opposed his own notion of true philosophy, which was defined as a disinterested pursuit of truth. In his opinion, the Sophists were mere spin doctors, to use a modern phrase, experts on political pamphleteering, who offered tuition in outwitting and manipulating one's audience. Consequently, they did not deserve the title of true lovers of wisdom.

Clearly, the rules for arguing one's case in a court of law or structuring one's discourse in a speech do not translate immediately into seeking for the essence of things. In this respect, Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Prodicus, Hippias, Thrasymachus and Lycophron never aspired to the position of *aletheia's* ministers (in the traditional, Latin sense of the word). Instead, real wisdom was, for them, synonymous with the skills which could be used in the public sphere; it was to be at the service of those citizens who grappled with actual problems and practical (i.e. political) dilemmas.^x Of course, it is possible to argue that the Sophists were not true philosophers but, *mutatis mutandis*, Plato and his followers may be seen as lacking in practical wisdom, which the Sophists regarded as the only true kind of wisdom available to human beings. In the case of the pioneers of judicial oratory (i.e. Corax and Tisias) their interest in what Plato, much later, designated as rhetoric, derived from an urgent need to defend their rights in a court of law in Syracuse. Thereby, the two became pragmatists *avant la lettre*.

Contemporary controversies over rhetoric once again polarize the academic community: the neopragmatists (most notably Stanley Fish, who is a major champion of antifoundationalism in the United States)

cross swords with the adherents of traditional Platonic philosophy. In this clash of views, members of the latter group often construe rhetoric and truth as being poles apart, as if rhetoric, by definition, could not have anything to do with truth, despite Aristotle's unambiguous association of the former with the latter in his treatise on the art of persuasion.^{xi} In consequence, for the last two and a half millennia Plato's notion of rhetoric as inevitably tainted by the stigma of manipulation and falsehood has reigned supreme. Fish sums up Plato's charges against rhetoric by claiming that they amount to one major accusation, "an accusation that repeats one of the perennial antirhetorical *topoi*, that rhetoric, the art of fine speaking, is all show, grounded in nothing but its own empty pretensions, unsupported by any relation to truth."^{xii} Of course, Fish does not subscribe to this characterization and goes on to declare himself as a champion of rhetoric and an admirer of the Sophists (particularly of Protagoras and Gorgias), whom he applauds in the first part of his essay concerned with the art of fine speaking.

The conclusion of Fish's essay includes a homage paid to Richard Rorty, who is described there as one of the major champions of "rhetorical thinking." At the same time, Rorty's writings prove that after nearly 2500 years it is still possible (and maybe even necessary) to rehabilitate sophistic views by advertising their message in the form of a consistent and convincing neopragmatist position. According to Fish, Rorty is, in this respect, a perfect role model for his potential (and actual) followers, an exemplary *homo rhetoricus*, an antithesis of the *homo seriusus*.^{xiii} The serious man's gravity is founded upon an essentialist worldview and a corresponding notion of personal identity. The rhetorical man, in turn, is the sort of person, who – like Rorty and Fish as well as their predecessors: Nietzsche, James, and Dewey – is prepared to brave a world in which truth is merely a function of our vital needs, and its value is relative to how effectively it furthers human efforts and projects.

- ⁱ I discuss the essay by Kimball and Stanley Fish's response to it in some more detail in "The Siren Songs of Rhetoric: On the Rhetorical in Stanley Fish's Critical Performance," *Ad Americam: Journal of American Studies* 6/2006, pp. 133-142.
- ⁱⁱ See Leszek Drog, *Disciplining the New Pragmatism: Theory, Rhetoric, and the Ends of Literary Study* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 207-224.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 12.
- ^{iv} Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*. Second Edition (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).
- ^v Rorty's most elaborate critique of epistemology and representationalism may be found in his *magnum opus: Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1980).
- ^{vi} Fish's case is a little more complicated as he insists on distinguishing his position from Rorty's by qualifying it as a "weak" antifoundationalism – see Stanley Fish, "One More Time" in Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, eds., *Postmodern Sophistry: Stanley Fish and the Critical Enterprise* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 265-297.
- ^{vii} See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Classroom: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 21-67.
- ^{viii} See Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Company, 1960), p. 259.
- ^{ix} In his book on Protagoras, Edward Schiappa argues that Protagoras's fragments quoted by Diogenes may be recognized as a reliable source of knowledge about the sophist's views, although his original texts on the subject have not been preserved – see Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, p. 89.
- ^x One of the best and most straightforward illustrations of such an attitude may be found in William James's *Pragmatism*, where, in Lecture 2, he discusses the 'squirrel on a tree' example – see William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), pp. 17-18.
- ^{xi} Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (Book 1), <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/a8rh/complete.html>> (accessed 23 Oct 2007).
- ^{xii} Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 472.
- ^{xiii} Fish borrows those two notions from Richard Lanham – see Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, p. 482.