

This review was never published, though two separate book-review editors for Philosophy and rhetoric were set to publish it, until they read it, and never responded to my inquiries thereafter. My guess is that they thought I was too hard on the book, and perhaps on Plato as well.

Richard Marback. *Plato's dream of sophistry*. Studies in Rhetoric/Communication. Thomas W. Benson, Series editor. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press. iii+ 163pp. \$24.95 (cloth) ISBN 1-57003-240-8

I grew up in a little town on Vancouver Island. We lived, as everyone did, in a large new home. We looked out, as everyone did, on the inside channel, and on the mountains leaning over it from the mainland beyond. At the top of the long, slow hill out of town were the vestiges of a temperate rain forest, where ancient, shaggy Douglas Firs gathered around a rocky gorge full of cold pools ranged in steps down to a sudden plunging waterfall. But, it stunk. On what should have been the loveliest days, still and warm, the air was yellow with stink. Masticating trees and vomiting sulphur, a pulp mill had made the town. It spawned the large homes and peopled the prospects. It had even given us the gorge, a spillway for a hydro-electric dam; the trees were spared because it was too steep to log economically. Plato is the Pulp Mill of Rhetoric.

Rhetoric, in the elemental sense of symbolic inducement, would be here without Plato, but would rhetoricians? Would the discipline?

Who knows? But Richard Marback's brief, intriguing history of Platonic prospects on rhetoric, and rhetorical prospects on Plato, suggests that a discipline without Plato at the fountainhead would be mighty different. The anti-foundationalism which has governed rhetorical theory and historiography for a decade and a bit tends to characterize Plato (or often, more generally, Plato-n-Aristotle) only as a mountainous obstacle to Real (that is, Sophistic) Rhetoric, and to characterize the cold shadow of that mountain as 2500 years long, out of which we are only now crawling, into the (praise the anti-foundationalists!) renewed sunshine of the sophists. Marback's book shows not only (1) how the story is much more complicated and interesting than Plato masticating sophists and vomiting philosophy, but also (2) how the sophistic sunshine is as inescapably Platonic as the shadow.

The book's title, *Plato's Dream of Sophistry*, is perfect, but also perfectly cryptic without the key provided by the following anecdote, from Olympiodorus's *Vita Platonis* (Marback offers it as his lead epigram):

Shortly before he died, Plato dreamt that he had become a swan which flew from tree to tree, thereby causing the utmost trouble to the archers who wanted to shoot him down. Simmias the Socratic interpreted the dream as meaning that Plato would elude all the pains of his interpreters. (vii)

Marback's history, that is, is a history of interpretive receptions. But there is one more remove. It is not the general reception of Plato he concerns himself with, but the specific reception of Plato's own reception of the sophists: interpretations of interpretations. Collectively, this welter of interpretations argues that Simmias was right. While one group of hermeneutical hunters aims into a tree over here, another group sights up into a tree over there, another stalks the forest floor, and most of them have their bows drawn for each other as well. In this tree roosts a deeply sophistic Plato, a champion of rhetoric; in that one, a Plato neutral to sophistry, but antagonistic to certain sophists; waddling and honking below is a Plato unutterably antagonistic to sophistry itself.

This last Plato, a mean-tempered swan insanely hostile to sophistry, has of course been the prey of most recent archers. But it doesn't take a very long memory to recall, say, Everett Lee Hunt's seminal essay on Plato as the architect of the House of Rhetoric (erected by Aristotle), or Edwin Black's important argument that Plato's views on rhetoric were closer to those of the sophists than to Aristotle's. Nor does it take much investigation to forecast the most *au courant* target--or, anti-target: the restless, polyphonic, anti-foundationalist swan: "Plato has no message", Robert Wardy says (1996, 53; see also Petruzzi, 1999). This swan, to the extent that he takes a position on Plato, is the one Marback offers up.

While Anthony Petruzzi (1999, 369) takes rhetoricians to task for undue concentration on *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* at the expense of all the other dialogues (as did Golden, 1984, 18, and, before him, Black, 1958, 363), the preoccupation is perfectly understandable; they are the only dialogues that concern themselves in any focussed way with rhetoric, and *Gorgias* is the text with the earliest extant occurrence of *rhetoric* (*rhetorike*), a philological datum some scholars (most notably Thomas Cole) use to date the genesis not only of the term but also of the field; and, even more incredibly, to dub Plato its prime mover. Accordingly, Marback begins with the *Gorgias* and his history is primarily of interpretations of it and of the *Phaedrus*.

Marback seems to recognize the arbitrariness of Cole's origin myth--one might just as well date the beginnings of literature with the first extant use of that word--but he also acknowledges the pivotal importance of that dialogue in shaping subsequent perceptions of all things rhetorical. Indeed, he seems pretty happy calling rhetoric "the discipline [Plato] founded" (7), and he does so in the context of discussing Cole's case. But that's not the whole story. "There is no rhetoric without Plato," he says in echo of John Poulakos, "and no Plato without sophistry" (10). This maneuver allows Marback a cake-and-eat-it-too framework of Plato founding a discipline already being practiced by others. That isn't unheard of in the history of ideas (think of Freud, or Lavoisier, or Watson and Crick), but in this instance it is very peculiar. There is a great deal of straightforward, if hypocritical, condemnation in Plato's treatments of rhetoric, only the merest crumbs in the direction of legitimizing it, and no evidence at all that would count towards 'founding' it. Marback is not alone--that is effectively Hunt's position as well, for instance--but that

only means he is wrong in good company. This view is also very nicely suited to the kind of keyword historiography Marback adopts: tracing the various significant deployments of the on-again, off-again lexical polarities of *Plato* and *sophist*, *Platonism* and *sophistry*.

Unfortunately skipping the first Neoplatonist, Aristotle, and (though less problematically) Roman rhetoric, Marback takes up the history of these notions in four quite distinct chapters, four pools along the spillway flowing out from Plato and his damn *Gorgias*. Centering on Augustine, he charts

- Neoplatonic Sophistry in Late Antiquity.

Centering on Marsilio Ficino, he examines

- The Renaissance of Plato and the Idea of Sophistry.

Centering on (the Baconian) Samuel Parker, he follows

- Plato and the Advancement of Learning.

Centering on Kant, but with significant excursuses on Brucker and Hegel, he sketches

- Platonic Ambivalence in the German Enlightenment.

Go back and put quotation marks around the bulleted object noun phrases, if you like: they are Marback's chapter titles, and--like that of the book, as well as those of each and every subsection--they very clearly label the content within.

Neoplatonic sophistry, the phrase anchoring the first of these chapters, has the look of an oxymoron, and indeed Marback calls *Platonism* and *sophistry* "opposites" (12-13) when he introduces these words as keyterms. But, he reminds us, they were not always thus. The Second Sophistic in particular exalted *sophistry*--even the "philosophic sophistry founded by Gorgias" (21, paraphrasing Philostratus)--without a concomitant deprecation of *Platonism*. The two words were largely independent (the former labeling brilliant oratory on a broad range of subjects, the latter a specific complex of civic and metaphysical ideas), and they could quite naturally fall cheek to jowl in the period. Marback singles out Porphyry for his exemplary cheek and his exemplary jowl. Best known in the history of philosophy as a disciple of Plotinus who disseminated Neoplatonism in the Latin West, Porphyry was unambiguously sophistic:

possessed of wide learning, practiced in the art of public oratory, and initiated into magical rites, Porphyry could be counted a sophist. His many skills and wide interests, in fact, guarantee it. (25)

In the history of rhetoric, however, Porphyry is perhaps better known as one of Augustine's targets in *City of God*, the over-educated and glib scape-grace who is at an epistemological disadvantage to "any old Christian woman" (10.11). She has faith, and therefore certainty; he has only a confused plethora of possibilities. Augustine might with much justice be called a Platonist himself, of course, and certainly he was a broadly knowledgeable, brilliant orator. But his Christian absolutism made him intolerant of competing perspectives, which included (pagan) Neoplatonism, and he took up *sophistry* (in the footsteps of the equally intolerant Plato) as a ready cudgel to beat those like Porphyry, who knew too much, and also too little. Marback outlines how Augustine effects distinctions between a Christian certitude to which oratory and even language were epiphenomenal and a (pagan) Neoplatonic contingency, founded on the slipperiness of language and prideful, showy rhetoric. The argument here has Augustine appropriating Platonism from the Neoplatonists by "tearing apart the terms *sophistry* and *Platonism* that the Neoplatonists had joined" (14).

In the most focussed chapter, "The Renaissance of Plato and the Idea of Sophistry", Marback looks closely at the Platonic sophistry of Ficino, an Italian philosopher whose translations and commentaries on Plato sit at the beginning of the Florentine renaissance. Ficino noted Plato's hostility towards the sophists, but also his dependence on a rhetoric indistinguishable theirs. Coupling this exploitation of rhetoric with his advocacy of desire as motive force in the *Symposium*, Ficino finds in Plato a champion of sophistic rhetoric. "This is not to say," Marback observes, "that there were no boundaries made between Platonist and sophist [in the period]; it is rather to say that the boundaries were still fluid" (47). Moreover, Marback takes the fluidity of those boundaries to be symptomatic of the Italian Renaissance, which rehearsed sophistic attitudes toward language and being and civic action, while simultaneously seeing Plato as the pinnacle of ancient thought. From the current vantage, that's a square circle. But the great authority of Quintilian and, especially, Cicero in the Renaissance--both of whom not only saw Gorgias in salutary terms but also the *Gorgias* as condemning only certain abuses of rhetoric--sharply constrained the reception of sophistry. Meanwhile, the vast influence of Plato on Christian theology made his name pleonastically attachable to all desirable learning. This confluence led to an interpretation of Plato as only mounting a selective assault on rhetoric (and poetry), as seeking to purge society only of "those orators and poets who take away the counsel of reason" (Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, quoted in Marback, 51). Ficino's Platonic rhetoric is hence much different, and richer, from the doling out of dialectically acquired truth adumbrated in the *Phaedrus*.

Ficino saves Plato by accommodating him to the sophists. The opposite turn is taken by Samuel Parker, who saves Plato by filtering out the sophistry. Parker reads Plato's condemnation of rhetoric very literally, and a literal condemnation inevitably rebounds on Plato: Parker condemns to irrelevance all the more overtly figurative parts of his dialogues, the "Emblems, Fables, Symbols, Parables, heaps of Metaphors, Allegories, and all sorts of Mystical Representations" (*Free and Impartial Censure of Platonick Philosophy*, quoted in Marback, 95): in short, *a lot of*

Plato's work. The pressures on Platonism were great in the early modern period, especially from the growing successes of natural philosophy, with its rejection of ancient testimony, rhetorical colors, and hermetic argumentation. Still, Plato's insistent arguments for the power of human reason were very consonant with the empiricist mission to lay Nature bare, and Parker conjures up a Plato to fight right alongside Bacon and Sprat and Locke in their battle for language reform. How? In large measure by pinning the sins of figuration on the sophists:

According to Parker, the sophists "made it their whole business to maintain wrangles by tricks and shifts of words, and therefore whoever undertook to dispute against them must of necessity be engaged in word quarrels. And hence it was that Plato does almost everywhere take such large compasses merely to vindicate the signification of a single word against their idle cavils". (99-100)

The sophists made him do it.

Parker's straining out of the approved philosophical lumps from Plato, draining away the rhetorical effluent, associating sophistry with effluvium only, marks the turning point for Marback, from a Neoplatonic perspective that could accommodate Plato and the sophists both, to a modern perspective "that asks us to choose either Plato or the sophists, denying us the opportunity of having both at the same time" (102).

Marback seems wistful about the Neoplatonic perspective--though, with its daemons, and word magic, and manufactured genealogies, it's difficult to see what has been lost; my own (modernist contaminated) view is that 'having both' is refusing to make a choice that Plato relentlessly insists we need to make.

Kant listens to Plato, and makes his choice: no one in modern thought is more hostile to rhetoric than he. "Persuasion is a mere semblance", Kant says (*Reason*, 685). And figuration seeks "to win over men's minds to the side of the speaker before they have weighed the matter, ... to rob the verdict of its freedom" (*Judgement*, 192). And *rhetoric* is "the art of transacting a serious business of the understanding as if it were a free play of the imagination" (*Judgement*, 184), or, more succinctly, "the art of deluding by means of a fair semblance" (*Judgement*, 192). Oratory, of course, "merits no *respect* whatever" (*Judgement*, 193n1). *Sophist* and its confreres never occur without express invocations of dishonesty, delusion, or subterfuge. Absent the gift for withering analogy, and this is Plato reincarnate. But listening to Plato's incessant demands that we choose between him and the sophists need not lead us down Kant's road.

Brian Vickers has measured Kant on this matter very ably, not sparing the cane. Marback offers a kinder, gentler reading, saying that Kant's use of *rhetoric* denotes a brawling discourse in which there is no neutral corner for judgement. To be fair, Marback says, we need to recognize the

patently narrow scope the word has in Kant. But recognizing the stranglehold Kant puts on the word does not oblige us to close our eyes to misrepresentation; one might just as easily construct an argument in which philosophy means only predicate calculus, and rhetoric means predicate-calculus-plus-all-other-forms-of-argumentation, patting rhetoric on the back for its wholesome and realistic scope. And, in any case, Vicker's ascerbity or Marback's placidity, it comes to the same thing: *rhetoric* is a foil to *philosophy* in Kant, a straw position which allows him to set up philosophy as an arena for argument "governed by agreed-upon rules" (117). Philosophy is rhetoric-plus-the-Marquis-of-Queensbury.

Marback follows his discussion of Kant with a sherbet course, a short, sharp account of Hegel's partial rehabilitation of the sophists--the "domestication of sophistry", he calls it (128)--but it doesn't cut the taste of Kant's discursive priggishness.

Marback is surely right that the story of Platonism and sophistry is a long, tortuous, commingled affair, and that it is not a simple matter of antagonism. It is a complex matter of antagonism. Plato loathed the sophists, and while a great deal else is going on in the dialogues, they prosecute a systematic campaign of intellectual eradication against all things sophistic, especially a full-blooded rhetoric. The tradition that Marback chronicles of seeing the *Gorgias* as only condemning sophists, not sophistry, a tradition with roots in Cicero and Quintilian, is largely based on the cognitive dissonance resulting from a joint veneration of Plato and of rhetoric. The more modern tradition of taking Plato at his word in *Gorgias* but seeking salvation for rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* draws from the same well. The *Phaedrus* is a Machiavelian exercise in the right of salvage: ram the ship and fish what you need out of the wreckage. Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* is only available to the philosopher, only deployed once the philosopher's real job is over, and only brought to bear on the rationally degenerate.

The current view of Wardy and Petruzzi (and perhaps of Marback) also wants to have Plato and to have rhetoric, this time by emphasizing the literary and rhetorical aspects of his dialogues. "No literary critic of any sophistication would dream of attributing the words or sentiments of a character in tragedy to the tragedian himself", argues Wardy, ergo no one "should contemplate attributing to Plato himself what any interlocutor, including Socrates, expresses" (1996, 53). And Petruzzi finds the modernist condemnation of Plato in rhetoric as following from a blindness to "Plato's polyvocal realm of dialogue, dialectic, and drama" (1999, 368). But no literary, or rhetorical, critic of any sophistication should miss a theme as rampant as the condemnation of sophistry in Plato, nor as straightforward as the condemnation of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, nor as clear as the subordination of rhetoric to dialectic in the *Phaedrus*.

None of this diminishes the extraordinary value of Plato's contribution to Western thought--he didn't like rhetoric unless his foot was on its neck--but neither does that contribution make him a friend of rhetoric. Attempts to do so, like Ficino's or Petruzzi's, invariably read Plato's rhetorical

techniques against Plato's pronouncements on rhetoric. He can't really mean it, they say, look how pretty he writes.

It is, of course, impossible not to think of sophistry in Platonic terms, but that is not necessarily a good thing for rhetoric. Nor does it make Plato a sophist, except under conditions of interpretation that flatly ignore the way Plato deploys the words *sophist* and *rhetoric*. Petruzzi, for instance, serves up a Platonic swan form whom "rhetoric is a fundamental part of the thinking process, 'the dialogue of the mind with itself' ([Sophist] 264b)" (1999:377). But the *Sophist* (nor the *Greater Hippias*, which he also leans his argument heavily on) does not so much as mention rhetoric. It is concerned overwhelmingly with dialectical reasoning (as is the *Hippias*, to a lesser extent).

Marback finds in Plato's dream two historiographical tactics:

Plato's dream offers two distinct interpretive strategies for narrating histories in the West, either the rhetorical tradition can be described as an ongoing (though so far futile) attempt to define rhetoric once and for all or as a constant process of keeping the meaning of rhetoric open (1).

But this is wrong, at least if we follow Simmias's stage directions: the dream only licenses one tactic, the constant process of keeping meaning open, Plato always flapping away from a definitive interpretation. Marback's affection for the dream is the appeal of this image, one that fits well with the views of Wardy and Petruzzi: a flapping Plato is a good thing. But where Simmias sees nothing other than failure for the archers, Marback apparently sees nothing other than success. Simmias's hermeneutical hunters always miss, Marback's always get their swan, all interpretations being equal. A flapping Plato also suits Marback's key word approach, using a few terms as diagnostics to understand an interpretation "in its own terms", with no external standards of judgement. But hermeneutics is an empirical enterprise, with at least two external governors--the object text and its language.

The second tactic, a (futile) once-and-for-all attempt at definitively skewering Plato, Marback suggests, is misguided. Quiver your arrows. Or, since hunting hermeneuts *can't* quiver their arrows (or they cease to be hunting hermeneuts), the advice is rather more like: shoot an arrow in the air, wherever it lands you will find, necessarily, a skewered swan, a valid interpretation of Plato. And *Plato's Dream of Sophistry* does read a bit like four randomly shot arrows, one landing in the late-classical Latin West, another in the Renaissance Italy, another in Early Modern England, another in Enlightenment Germany. Each reception is just one more place setting at the Moveable Plato.

But, if we can be comfortable rejecting, say, Ficino's position that "words actively draw ... their persuasive power from the natural forces of the cosmos" (56), or rejecting his claim that Diotima

couldn't have existed because the idea of a female philosopher is too absurd (71), or rejecting the genealogy he adopted to give Plato a suitable Christian pedigree--and I am comfortable rejecting all of them--why should we find it any less comfortable rejecting his case that Plato advocates sophistry? What is it that obliges us to evade judgement about the validity of an interpretation when its object is a text, but not when its object is the historical record or the natural world?

Speaking of the natural world, I have a confession: the town was there before the mill. Smaller, quieter, without the tracts of large houses, but with the prospect and with more trees, it was a fishing town. What Macmillan Blodel brought to the town was jobs, people, buildings, roads, dams, spillways, a new definition. And stink. An alternate definition, and the attendant paraphernalia of jobs and people and buildings, might have come from any number of sources, not all of them bringing sulphur.

Rhetoric in the elemental sense of symbolic inducement would be here without Plato. It's the human condition. But it is hard to believe that it wouldn't also be here in the sense of the disciplinary matrices we participate in, as well, and with much the same configurations. Nobody believes anymore, surely, that there would have been no Aristotle without Plato, and it is Aristotle who collated and synthesized and improvised the discipline into life, who worked the powerful sophistic traditions into a coherent and compelling, if not entirely consistent, framework. And does anyone wish to thank Plato for figuration, for *topoi*, for stases, for invention and arrangement and style and delivery and memory?

Rhetoric would be here without Plato. But, would the stink?

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