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THE WRITTEN TEXT IN THE ATHENIAN POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE FIRST DECADES OF 4TH CENTURY BC

SUMMARY: The growing impact of textuality in the classical Greece seems to be generally accepted view. However, the importance of the written text as an autonomous mean of transmission in different spheres of life in Athens in the IV century BC is more complex phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is to present a general sketch of this issue with particular emphasis on politics and individuals whose ambition was to have a real impact on the current affairs. In this context the activity of Isocrates and his self-consciousness provides especially interesting material for debate.

KEYWORDS: textuality, orality, rhetoric, Isocrates

Asking about the status of a text in Athens in the 4th c. BC may seem absurd and quite out of the place in the best time of Greek literature. Questioning Athenian literacy in the age of Plato and Xenophon is certainly not my intention; what puzzles me is the autonomy of a text in this seemingly overwhelmingly textual habitat.[1] The purpose of this paper is to sketch an outline of the issue and point at the particularly interesting phenomena.

In the beginning of the 4th c. BC writing was used as a basic tool for preserving and transferring information: for decades Athenians had

[1] The development of literacy in Athens has been discussed for a long time by several scholars, e.g. see: Havelock 1963; Havelock 1982; Harris 1989; Thomas 1996: 33-50; the summary of the most important arguments was given by Nails 1995: 159-179.

been publishing laws and decisions of the gathering, lists of all kinds, reports and accounts of magistrates and diplomats (Hansen 1999: 28-29, Thomas 1996: 41-45). Administration of the Athenian state and League without writing would be almost impossible to imagine. Common knowledge of the alphabet does not necessarily imply that every Athenian citizen was able to use letters and understand a complex written statement; it would be reasonable to assume that these abilities were characteristic of adult male citizens, that is of people who possessed full citizenship, and perhaps even several men included in this group were just able to read simple words and write their own names.[2]

People brought up in the world dominated by writing can hardly imagine that the knowledge of writing does not make it impossible to live and act in the public without using this tool.[3] It seems more difficult to imagine than a strictly oral society. In order to comprehend the role and status of a text as a medium of communication in the environment where people know writing, but are able to live and work without it, we must look at it from a different perspective and abandon the subconscious assumption about the primacy of writing in every situation where both writing and oral transmission coexist. A simple orality/textuality opposition should not be the used as a universal key to understand Athenian culture in the 5th c. and 4th c. BC.[4]

Theories of McLuhan, Havelock and Ong following Perry and Lord were milestones in the history of culture and certainly contributed a great deal to the comprehension of the fascinating and complex phenomenon of oral culture and textual culture. We realized that invention of writing radically changed not only technical means of transmission and communication, but also influenced the way the human brain works and this discovery opened a new perspective (McLuhan 1962; Havelock 1963; Havelock 1982; Ong 1982).[5] However, even

[2] The literacy of Athenians is mentioned e.g. by Luiza Rzymowska in reference to Hans M. Hansen, see: Rzymowska 2004: 171-172; Hansen 1999: 310-312.

[3] On the presumed connection of writing and civilization, see: Woolf 1996: 84.

[4] Apart from the scholars mentioned in the note 1, see also: Worthington 1996: 165-177; I have already referred to the issue, see: Janik 2005.

[5] These scholars refer to the fundamental woks on Greek archaic epic poetry: Parry 1928; Lord 1960.

these scholars were aware, to some extent, of the uniqueness of ancient culture.[6] The socio-political context instigated the development of rhetoric; anybody who would like to speak during a political gathering or had a case in the court of law was obliged to deliver a speech. The quality of such a performance decided about the success. The citizens rendered their decision after hearing the speech without consulting any notes or protocols. Hence the ability to hear and remember was still one of the most valued virtues. Orality and aurality are crucial terms in understanding almost all classical culture. If one takes all this into consideration, the question of the effectiveness of a text as an independent and single means of transmission becomes quite reasonable. We should of course exclude drama and lyric poetry as particular types of artistic expression and refer our reflection to prose.

It is much easier to answer this question in reference to philosophy or historiography, that is to the texts which nowadays we would rate among academic or scientific literature. In both fields written texts work perfectly, although we should remember that these treatises were read aloud and their authors always, at least to same degree, considered their esthetic attractiveness to the audience. Even then we may safely assume that a philosopher or a historian was able to attract attention and have some impact on the public using writing as a main means of transmission. At the same time it is notable that speeches become almost a compulsory element of a historical writing and Plato chooses to write dialogues, not treatises, still nobody would deny that in this case writing turns out to be quite effective at ensuring the survival of the authors' names and their works. Thus we could conclude that academic texts were rather independent from oral transmission, although their style and language reflect an inclination to discussion and dialectic controversy so characteristic of the Athenian culture.

Whereas the role of writing in the humanities seems to be obvious, especially if we consider the intertextual references present in the classical works since the very beginning of the literature, its significance in the public life, mainly in politics, should be treated as a more complex phenomenon. The question is whether a written text could be used as

[6] Rhetoric escapes the radical opposition of orality and literacy, see: I. Worthington 1996, Haskins 2004: 10-47.

an effective and autonomous tool also in this sphere. For the purpose of this reflection we might talk about two basic kinds of texts connected with politics: philosophical and political considerations included in bigger units, mainly historical writings, and speeches published by the orators. The first group comprises speeches held by the characters taking part in historic events, Greek historiography provides multiple samples of such rhetoric; the famous Constitutional Debate from the III book of Herodotus' *History* (Hdt 80-82) is certainly one of the most recognized examples of the kind. The significance of such specimens for the public discourse in the long run seems to be unquestionable, their impact on the current affairs could be the effect of the reflection on the past, but we should remember that their authors aimed mainly at education, they intended to develop a certain attitude of their readers rather than influence current events.

It should not be omitted that this sort of transmission was aimed at the educated elite, which comprised a relatively small group; authors of rhetorical texts, who were known from their performances during public gatherings, had much more chances to reach a broader audience.

Well-known politicians of the 5th c. BC did not publish their speeches, perhaps prof. Turasiewicz is right when he says that they wanted their actions to speak for themselves, and as they achieved their goal when the citizens voted in favor and they did not need to write speeches for financial profit, they did not bother to document their professional activity (Turasiewicz 1991: LXXIV). The growing popularity of rhetoric and the sophists' influence contributed to the emergence of rhetors for whom writing and publishing speeches became important; it was vital especially for the professional speech-writers, logographers: published speeches together with the success of their clients in courts promoted their talents in the best possible way and attracted new customers. Gradually also politicians and teachers of rhetoric came to appreciate this method of promotion; for some of them it could come more naturally since they began their career with writing speeches for the others in hope that some day they would be able to leave this job behind and act in politics on their own. The term "rhetor" came to signify a "politician", because taking active part in politics was inevitably connected with speaking in public. Teachers of rhetoric and eristic,

who often had the status of guests in Athens, used to publish epideictic speeches in order to present their exceptional oratorial skills. Such publications were used as ready patterns for students of rhetoric.

Antiphon of Ramnus, politician and orator executed for the participation in the oligarchical coup d'état in 411 BC, is believed to be the first author who had written his speeches composed for himself and for the others. The question of the authorship of the treatise *On truth*, whether it was written by this Antiphon, or not, is of no relevance to the subject.[7]

Since the beginning of the 4th c. BC writing political speeches became popular and a great deal of such works preserved to the present day provide a vital source of information for the history of this turbulent time. Asking about the aim of the publication and the status of these texts seems quite natural in the context. It is usually assumed that they more or less represent the version of the real speeches, although their authors could make several corrections before publication; published texts could also play the role comparable to political pamphlets designed to influence public opinion and current political decisions as well as citizens' views in the long run. This second view was shared by Wilamowitz, Meyer and Wendland, who argued that Demosthenes' speeches were composed as pamphlets for the political companions of the orator, to be read in clubs and private houses (Adams 1912: 5). The review of the discussion was delivered by Ch. D. Adams, who joined the debate in 1912 and generally did not agree with the "pamphlet-theory" (Adams 1912: 5-22). On the next two pages I will recall his arguments. In order to prove his point Adams listed four reasons for writing pamphlets in the political system based on the direct contact with

[7] Thuc. VIII 68; the identity of Antiphon had already been discussed in antiquity. Xenophon's mention about Antiphon the Sophist (*Mem*. I 6) provided arguments for the assuming existence of two writers of this name: conservative politician and the sophist promoting quite opposite views. Several scholars followed Hermogenes in his opinion about stylistic differences between particular writings (*Peri ideon* 385-387, Hermogenis opera, ed. H. Rabe, Lipsiae 1913). In the 20th century scholars focused on the content of these works; last decades brought more arguments for the unitarian fraction; nevertheless, the question is still open; for the summary of the arguments in the works of the scholars representing opposite views see: Pendrick 2002: 1-26; Gagarin 2002: 35-52.

citizens: the first would be to promote unpopular political concepts, which would be difficult to support openly; e.g. oligarchical views (it might instigate this sort of writings in the end of the 5th c. BC, especially in 411 and 404 BC); the second reason would refer to people who were not able to speak in public, therefore chose to write. However, this seems quite reasonable, it is not valid in the Athenian political reality in the 4th c. BC, as Demosthenes and the *Athenian Constitution* mention special gatherings, when everybody, even a slave, was permitted to speak (*Phillippic* 3.3, *Ath. Pol.* 43.6). The third situation would be composing speeches for the selected audience consisting of few trusted listeners to be discussed in more subtle way than during public meetings. The last motif of writing would be an intention to reach the audience outside one's own city-state. I would suggest one more possible explanation: pamphlets could be composed in order to prolong the discussion and to influence the some political or social idea.

According to a common belief, political pamphlets were already composed in the 5th c. BC, although we have only one sample of such a text coming from this period, the so-called Old Oligarch attributed to Pseudo-Xenophon, the ironic praise of democracy presented by the opponent of the system. This work fits perfectly into Adams' scheme representing the first category. Xenophon's *Poroi*, *De vectigalibus*, provides an example of a text for a smaller audience.

Political speeches that could be taken into account in the debate on pamphlets first emerged at the middle of the 4th c. BC. Most of them were composed by Demosthenes and although we have also three written by his political opponent, Aeschines, it could be difficult to argue that the latter were designed as pamphlets regarding the current Athenian policy, since they all refer to the peace of Philocrates, 346 BC, and were probably published after 330 BC. They may have been useful as a statement on the political decisions of their author and presented his version of the events, but their effect on the current political situation was rather small.

Demosthenes' speeches could be useful as pamphlets for the promotion of his politics outside Athens and building an anti-Macedonian coalition and it certainly would be quite rational, when we consider his actions, still, as Adams emphasizes, Demosthenes always presents

a strictly Athenian point of view and never addresses the audience from another city-state. Other reasons for composing political pamphlets do not apply to Demosthenes, who did not need to write fictional speeches in order to influence his fellow-countrymen. Among contemporary scholars many, like Ian Worthington, share a more traditional opinion and believe that Demosthenes' speeches were published after delivery, with possible revision of the text (Worthington 2013: 7), Jeremy Trevett however argues that Demosthenes' works are actually drafts of his speeches, later presented at the gathering, published without serious corrections (Trevett 1996).[8] It is a well-known fact that Demosthenes used to write speeches before a performance at the ecclesia and, as Trevett proves, there is no reason why he would have to publish them, political speeches were not usually published, we had no certain knowledge about any corrections and the argument referring to the magnificence of the speeches allegedly surpassing oral performance does not seem convincing. Regardless of whether we find Trevett's arguments plausible, his thesis induces us to draw at least one conclusion: written political speeches whose authors were acting politicians were not designed to have a decisive impact on the effectiveness of their actions. Decisions depended on citizens gathered in ecclesia and it would be difficult to reach the majority of them with such texts. On the other hand, writing pamphlets for a smaller audience would not influence the result of a voting and most probable would be close to persuasion directed to people who did not need to be persuaded at all. Adams thinks that pamphlets as a tool were useful for people like Critias, Theramenes, Thrasymachus, Lysias or Isocrates (Adams 1912: 10). And however these individuals had much in common, since they all shared more or less oligarchical sympathies, they did not follow exactly the same path. There are significant differences between their political activities. Apart from Lysias and Isocrates all of them were active politicians, for whom speaking in public was natural. The situation of Lysias was particular because of his status: as a metic he was not able to develop a regular career as a political speaker although he had an opportunity to present his oratorical talents in before the Athenian audience.

[8] In the note 1 we may find the list of other scholars taking part in the discussion.

Isocrates' professional activity deserves particular attention in this context: as a well-educated man with a good social standing and an Athenian by birth Isocrates could easily pursue a political career, instead he chose not to engage in political life – a weak voice and stage fright being his excuses. There is no reason why we should not believe in this weakness, on the other hand we may suspect that these natural disadvantages provided Isocrates with a perfect explanation for taking his own path.[9] He did not approve of the general quality of political debate, and this could be the most vital reason for his withdrawal from active political life. He did not hesitate to criticize his fellow-country men, but he strived not to be perceived as an enemy of the democratic state. Deeply concerned about the quality of Athenian politics Isocrates always wished to be an advisor; instead of speaking in public he decided to publish speeches. His works are usually described as "treatises", although Isocrates put a lot of effort into concealing the fact that they were never meant to be held in front of a bigger audience and they were composed as texts and as such were to be received by their recipients.[10]

Considering Adams' categories in reference to Isocrates we should say that they only partially apply to his work: he did not hide his views, he officially addressed his texts either to one individual reader, or to a bigger audience, and even if in reality they were composed for the elite, they were not circulated in secrecy among members of some particular social circle. There was no formal obstacle for Isocrates' speaking in public, so the only important reason of writing pamphlets in the case of Isocrates would be his wish to influence the audience outside Athens. Such a conclusion could be plausible, since Isocrates was perhaps the only author of his time, who emphasized common good as a necessary principle in the relations between Greek states. Nevertheless, he addressed his texts to the Athenians, and some say that even in his treatise *Philip* he really was speaking to his compatriots. Therefore it would be too far-fetched to regard Isocrates "international" ambitions

[9] I have already referred to this issue following Too and Michelini in their opinions; see: Janik 2012: 132-133; Too 1995: 90-97; Michelini 1998: 115.

[10] On the intrinsic connection of orality and literacy in rhetoric Isocrates see: Haskins 2004: 10-47; Worthington 1996; Rzymowska 2004; Welch 1999.

as a decisive factor in composing political pamphlets. I would rather seek an answer in his aforementioned attitude towards contemporary politics in general and the complicated relation to Athenian democracy. I do believe that Isocrates consciously chose the written text as a medium and was also aware of the risk of using it as the only tool. The adequate passages we find in his letters to Dionysius and to the rulers of Mytilene. The first one addressed to the tyrant of Sicily, and dated at 368 BC, begins with a whole paragraph referring to the weakness of a written text of a letter as compared to the performance of a living speaking person, since the latter gives an opportunity to clarify any doubts and makes the communication easier (*Ep*. 1.2) We might classify these remarks as customary expression of false modesty, but, due to one particular observation of Isocrates, I am inclined to think of these lines as something more important and applying not only to the letter itself: among the obvious advantages of spoken delivery the author admits, that "all men give greater credence to the spoken rather than to the written word, since they listen to the former as to practical advice and to the latter as to an artistic composition" (trans. L. Van Hook[11]), πάντες τοῖς λεγομένοις μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς γεγραμμένοις πιστεύουσι, καὶ τῶν μὲν ὡς εἰσηγημάτων, τῶν δ' ὡς ποιημάτων ποιοῦνται τὴν ἀκρόασιν. Isocrates does not seem to convey something odd, or unexpected, on the contrary, this remark has no special place in the paragraph, it appears among others statements, the meaning of which should not surprise a contemporary reader. Isocrates refers to the common knowledge, but in his case this knowledge has particular bearing, as he must have been aware that it applied not only to his letters. He chose to write instead of to speak in public and he certainly understood, or came to understand, the risk of stripping his texts at least of some part of authority. I am induced to assume that he wrote about it in a letter because its written form was obvious and it made all the remarks about writing look natural. He did not usually discuss this problem in his treatises, since their textual character was to be hidden in the background. A letter provided a perfect excuse to present some tension between spoken and written word and in his letters words denoting writing, also as opposed to speaking,

[11] Isocrates. Vol. III with an English Translation by Larue van Hook, LOEB Classical Library 2006, p. 373.

appear relatively often (e.g. *Ep.* 1.2, 1.5, *Ep.* 5.1, *Ep.* 8.7-8), and this may imply that Isocrates gave some thought to the subject. It may also be inferred from the fact that he came back to it several years later, in his treatise addressed to king Philip of Macedon (*Phil.* 25-29), where he devoted three paragraphs to persuade Philip, that the text he was going to receive was worth attention and even without the advantages of proper presentation its content deserved the kings' consideration. Isocrates writes about the difference in persuasion of spoken and read things (οἱ λεγόμενοι, οἱ ἀναγιγνωσκόμενοι λόγοι) and once more emphasizes that people believe that the former treat (ῥετορεύεσθαι) of serious and necessary matters (σπουδαῖα πράγματα, τὰ κατεπείγοντα), whereas the latter are composed (γεγράφαι) in order to show off and earn money (πρὸς ἐπίδειξιν καὶ ἐργολαβίαν). The significance of the passages referring to the different reception of the spoken and written word became particularly interesting, when we consider Isocrates' explanation of his not taking part in politics and not speaking in public. The first comes from the letter to the ruler of Mytilene (*Ep.* 8.7-8): he speaks about his weak voice and lack of courage, but in the very next sentence he observes that he was not useless helping others as an advisor (σύμβουλος) and a "fellow-combatant" (συναγωνιστής), and that he composed "more discourses on behalf of the freedom and independence (πλείους λόγους ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐλευθερίας καὶ αὐτονομίας τῆς τῶν Ἑλλήνων) of the Greeks than all those together who have worn the floor of our platforms" (transl. L. Van Hook[12]). The next passage appears, not surprisingly, in "Philip" (*Phil.* 81-82), and might be treated as complementary to the lines mentioned above: Isocrates explains to the king, why he wrote to Dionysius, although himself he was neither a military commander (στρατηγός), nor an orator (ῥήτωρ) or a man of power (δυναστής). This paragraph is another reference to the lines from the earlier letter to the Sicilian tyrant (*Ep.* 1.9). All three categories seem to denote people professionally engaged in serious politics. Isocrates repeats information about his physical and psychical weakness and argues that his ability to think right (τὸ φρονεῖν εὖ) and his good education (τὸ πεπειδεῦσθαι καλῶς) encourage him to give advice (συμβουλεύειν)

[12] 'Isocrates' Vol. III with an English Translation by Larue van Hook, LOEB Classical Library 2006, p. 465.

to the state, to the Hellenes and to the most eminent individuals. The sentence is clear enough to convince the modern reader that Isocrates seriously pondered his delicate position as a counsellor without any practical experience. The way he comments on the career he could not pursue reveals his attitude to this activity: he was not strong enough to "manage the mob" (ὄχλῳ χρῆσθαι), disgrace himself (μολύνεσθαι) and to take abuse among individuals wallowing on the platform (τοῖς ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος κυλινδουμένοις). The choice of words is hardly a coincidence and it could strengthen our assumption that physical and psychical limitations were not the only reasons of giving up the political career.

Isocrates is usually, and generally correctly, perceived as conservative and far from any sort of innovation, but as a matter of fact, his professional activity has no direct parallel in the contemporary intellectual world. His persistence in writing about current politics instead of speaking about it deserves special attention: he writes treatises in reference to current affairs, they are aimed to influence the audience, their author is not able to publish his reflections as quickly as modern publicists, nevertheless his work resembles their profession. Having all the reservations in mind I would not hesitate to call Isocrates the first publicist. It is difficult to estimate whether his efforts were successful. I would be argue for a rather limited influence of his writings. He was closest to real impact on important decisions in the case of the signing of the peace of Philocrates, unfortunately his *Philip* was finished, when the treaty had already been signed. Of course Isocrates' concepts must have been known, he consequently promoted them for years and perhaps thus he contributed to the development of events, but we are not able to prove it. It would be rather difficult to argue that written texts, without reinforcement of public presentation in the gathering, have real impact on political decisions or popular views. The case of Isocrates demonstrates the ambiguous position of a writer and political commentator and sheds some light on the autonomy of the text in the era of Plato and Demosthenes.

Famous orators owed their fame and influence in the state to their public performances, publishing speeches, so vital for the posterity, was of secondary importance for the authors. A written text deprived of

the performance of a speaker and verification of a living audience had all the chances of being classified as an intellectual exercise, intended to be read for pleasure or entertainment, maybe to provoke an interesting conversation in a moment free from serious political business.

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