Isocrates on Political Discourse & Civic Education

I. Isocrates, Introduction/Background
• Biography
  
  Long life & “3 careers”
  Relations with contemporaries (Plato, Aristotle, etc)

• The works of Isocrates
  Notes on the translation of Isocrates’ works

• Points on the literary form of Isocrates’ works

• Interest in Isocrates in rhetorical studies today

II. Isocrates: Central Points
• His “discipline”; emphasis or aims of his teaching
  
  Philosophia  How related to Platonic “Philosophy”?  
  Doxa vs. epistēmē (see pp. 63, 240, 254)
  
  Paideia tôn logôn  (= “Education in discoursing”)
  Civilizing effect of logos
  
  Rhētorikê?  Isocrates NEVER uses this term to describe his teaching or field of study. Why?

• Philosophy of education (pp. 65, 165, 239-244)
  
  Nature/Talent  Training  Practice/Exercise
  “Imitatio” (of suitable “paradigms”) (pp. 65, 165)
  
  Relative importance of the three variables

  Isocrates’ method(s) of instruction(?)

  How to move “theory” into “practice” (see pp. 239-240)
  Isocrates on kairos (e.g., p. 240 – Compare to Plato, Phaedrus & Alcidamas)

• Criteria for Discourse (cf. Rummel)
  
  Purpose  Content/Subject  Style
• Rhetorico-Ethical Ideal
  Speaking well = Thinking well (sound advice, prudent deliberation)

• Social/Political philosophy
  Panhellenism: Unity of Greeks – historical and mythological antecedents
  Greek cultural hegemony

  Civic engagement: By a “quietist”?  *(See below, “Orality/Literacy & Speaking/Writing: The Case of Isocrates” sec. (a))*

  Paradox, Inconsistency, or Other?

• Prose style: The Isocratean “Period”  *(See below for discussion/illustration)*
  Other notable stylistic features

• Isocrates’ importance in Western *intellectual history*
• Isocrates’ importance in Western *literary history*
• Isocrates’ importance in the history of *education*
• Isocrates’ importance in the history of *literacy*  *(See below, “Orality/Literacy & Speaking/Writing: The Case of Isocrates”)*
The Style of Isocrates: The “Period”

For classical rhetoricians, the “periodic” style was a manner of composing that sought to combine the matter and form of a thought and its expression in such a way as to delight a listener with sounds – echoes, rhymes, rhythms – or achieve effects of suspension or rapidity in order to compliment and augment the sense of the idea being presented. A classical periodos typically contains one main idea (subject and predicate) with the predicate often found at the end for a sense of climax or finality. Numerous phrases or clauses could be inserted to develop, qualify, restrict, extend, etc. the main idea. Depending on the idea and the ability of the writer/orator, these phrases and clauses could be arranged relationally (correlative, oppositional, disjunctive, etc.) with an equal number of syllables in each unit. Other figures of sound (alliteration, rhyme, etc.) could be common.

Isocrates was considered a master innovator of this style. Unfortunately, our translators (Mirhady & Too) do not often attempt to reproduce Isocrates’ periodic style in English. Here is one attempt, George Kennedy’s rendering of a sentence from Isocrates’ *Panegyricus*:

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Love of wisdom, then, which has helped us to discover and helped to establish all that makes Athens great, which has educated us for practical affairs and made gentle our relations with each other, which has distinguished misfortunes of ignorance from those of necessity and taught us to guard against the former and bear up against the latter, [this love of wisdom] OUR CITY made manifest and honored Speech, which all desire and enjoy those who know,

recognizing, on the one hand that this is the natural feature distinguishing us from all animals and that through the advantage it gives us we excel them in all other things, and seeing, on the other hand, that in other areas fortune is troublesome so that in those areas the wise fail and the ignorant succeed, and that there is no share of noble and artistic speech to the wicked, but it is the product of a well-knowing soul, and that the wise and those seemingly unlearned most differ from each other in this and that those educated liberally, right from the start, are not recognized by courage and wealth and such benefits, but most by what has been said, and that those who use speech well are not only powerful in their own cities, but also honored among other men;

and to such an extent has OUR CITY outstripped the rest of mankind in wisdom and speech that her students have become the teachers of others, and she has made the name of the Hellenes seem no longer that of a people, but that of an intelligence, and that those rather are called Greeks who share our education than those who share our blood.

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The next page, taken from Thomas Conley’s *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (2001), explains and attempts to illustrate the style in action:
It is difficult to convey in English the plasticity of syntax and the resources of assonance and alliteration possible in the Greek. But it is impossible to comprehend what periodic composition is capable of without seeing it in action. A sentence from Isocrates’ *Letter to Archidamus* provides a reasonably good illustration of his style:21

I might have spoken passably about even these matters since I knew, in the first place
that it is easier to treat copiously in cursory fashion occurrences of the past
than intelligently to discuss the future
and, in the second place
that all men are more grateful to those who praise
than to those who advise them—
for the former they approve as being well-disposed,
but the latter,
if the advice comes unbidden,
they look upon as officious—

nevertheless,
although I was already fully aware of all these considerations
I have refrained from topics which would surely be flattering and
now I propose to speak of such matters as no one else dares to discuss
because I believe that those who make pretensions to fairness
and practical wisdom should choose
not the easiest subjects, but the most arduous,
nor yet those which are sweetest to the ears of the listeners, but such as will avail to benefit
not only our own states,
but also all the other Greeks;
and such is the subject, in fact, on which I have fixed my attention at the present time.

This is a rather long sentence by English standards, indeed even by Greek standards; but for all its length, it is carefully constructed and possesses considerable vitality. In the first section, Isocrates tells us what he is not going to talk about; in the middle section, what he refuses to talk about and what he feels he has to say; and in the final section, he tells us what he needs to talk about. There is a clear plan guiding what appears to be a rather meandering thought, in other words; and a carefully modulated tone of urgency that is enhanced, not obscured, by the artistry of the speaker. “I have not come here to tell you what you want to hear,” Isocrates is saying. “I have come to tell you what you must do to save ourselves”; and then, at the very end, a note of emphasis capping the climax of the “not... not... but...” structure of the sentence up to that point. The structure of expectation and fulfillment

**CONSIDER: Optional exercise:** Compose a period of your own. You choose the subject. ...
The Style of Isocrates: More Examples

(a) Many times I have wondered at those who first convoked the national assemblies and established the athletic games, amazed that they [men, on the one hand] should have thought the prowess of men’s bodies to be deserving of so great reward, while [de, on the other hand] to those who had toiled in private for the public good and trained their own minds so as to be able to help also their fellow men they apportioned no reward whatsoever, when, in all reason, they ought rather to have made provision for the latter; for if [men] all the athletes should acquire twice the strength which they now possess, the rest of the world would be no better off; but if [de] a single man should attain wisdom, then all men will reap the benefit who are willing to share his insight. (Panegyricus 1-2)

(b) For who, be he young or old, is so indolent that he will not desire to have a part in this expedition, an expedition (men) led by the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians (. . .stratégoumenês), (de) gathered together in the cause of the liberty of our allies (. . .athroizomenês), (de) dispatched by all Greece (. . .ekpempomenês), (de) issuing forth to wreak vengeance on the barbarians (. . .poreuomenês)? And how great must we think will be the name (phêmên) and the fame (mnêmên) and the glory (doxan) which they will enjoy during their lives, or, if they die in battle, will leave behind them, they who will have won the meed of honor in such an enterprise? (Panegyricus 185-186)

(c) And yet how could men be shown to be braver or more devoted to Hellas than our ancestors, who, to avoid bringing slavery upon the rest of the Hellenes, (men) endured (etlēsan) to see their city made desolate, (de) their land ravaged, (de) their sanctuaries rifled and temples burned, (de) and all the forces of the enemy closing in upon their own country? (Panegyricus 96)

(d) For when that greatest of all wars broke out and a multitude of dangers presented themselves at one and the same time, (men) when our enemies regarded themselves as irresistible because of their numbers (de) and our allies thought themselves endowed with a courage which could not be excelled, we outdid them both, surpassing each in the way appropriate to each; and having proved our superiority in meeting all dangers, (men) we were straightway awarded the meed of valor, (de) and not long afterward we obtained sovereignty of the sea (men) by the willing grant of the Hellenes at large (de) and without protest from those who now seek to wrest it from us. (Panegyr. 71-72)
Orality/Literacy & Speaking/Writing: The Case of Isocrates

(a) Isocrates’ admissions of weak voice & lack of confidence for public speaking

As regards a political career I was the citizen the least suited by nature, for I did not have a voice sufficiently strong nor self-assurance (οὐτέ γὰρ φωνὴν ἕσχον ἰκανὴν οὔτε πόλμαν) to enable me to cope with the mob, to be reviled and to abuse those who parade on the speaker’s platform. (To Philip 81)

I abstained from politics and oratory, for I had neither an adequate voice nor self-assurance (οὐτε γὰρ φωνὴν ἑσχον ἰκανὴν οὔτε πόλμαν). (Letter 8.7)

I knew that my nature was neither sufficiently tough nor hard for political action and that it was imperfect for speaking and altogether useless. . .for I doubt whether any other citizen was so lacking in the two attributes which have the greatest power at Athens, a voice strong enough and self-assurance (οὔτω γὰρ ἐνδεχῆς ἐγενόμην τῶν μεγίστην δύναμιν ἐχόντων παρ’ ἡμῖν, φωνῆς ἰκανῆς καὶ πόλμης). (Panathenaicus 9, 10) (All translations from Too 1995, 74-75)

(b) Isocrates on the difference between speaking and (oral) reading of a text

I do not fail to realize what a great difference there is in persuasiveness between discourses which are spoken and those which are read, and that all men have assumed that the former are delivered on subjects which are important and urgent, while the latter are composed for display and personal gain. And this conclusion is not unreasonable; for when a discourse is robbed of the prestige and the voice of the speaker, and the variations which are made in the delivery (ἐπειδὰν γὰρ ὁ λόγος ἀποστερηθῇ τῆς τε δόξης τῆς τοῦ λέγοντος καὶ τῆς φωνῆς καὶ τῶν μεταβολῶν τῶν ἐν ταῖς ῥητορεῖαις γνωμένων), and, besides, of the advantages of timeliness and keen interest in the subject matter; when it has not a single accessory to support its contentions and enforce its plea, but is deserted and stripped of all the aids which I have mentioned; and when someone reads it aloud unpersuasively and without investing it with any (sense of) character, but rather as though he were simply counting out numbers (ἀναγιγνώσκῃ δὲ τις αὐτῶν ἀπειθῶς καὶ μηδὲν ἢδος ἐνσημανόμενος ἀλλ’ ἄσπερ ἀπαρθιθμῶν)—in these circumstances it is natural, I think, that it should make a poor impression upon its hearers. (To Philip 25-27)
Ancient criticism of Isocrates’ readerly (“voiceless”) style

(From Philodemus)

In fact, to judge from their writings, most of the sophists were miserable at delivery. For long sentences make delivery difficult, just as Demetrius too says about Isocrates’ works.** Hieronymous says that [Isocrates’] discourses are good for reading, but that it is absolutely impossible to declaim them as public orations in a rising voice and tone or to speak in this style with the requisite delivery (ἀναγγέλω[ν] μὲν αὐτοῦ τοὺς λόγους καλῶς δυνάμεις δια[ν]οσοῦσιν, δὴ[ν] ἡγοροῦσαι δὲ τὴν τε φω[ν]ὴν καὶ τὸν τόνον ἐπαξιωντα καὶ ἐν τούτῃ τῇ κατ[α]σκευή[ῖ μετὰ] τῇ[ς ἀρμοστο[ῦ]σις ὑποκρίσεως εἰπεῖν οὐ παντελῶς).

For he has dispensed with what is most important and most effective on a crowd: his style is unanimated, boring, and composed as though in a monotone (“in single [tonos]”) (ἄφησιν γὰρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνυπάκοας[ς] εἶναι τὴν λέξιν καὶ οἰόνει πρὸς εἶνα τὸν πεποιημένην); he has eliminated breaks, variety, and the partitioning created by increasing and relaxing tension and by emotional crescendos; and he is a slave to smoothness throughout. Therefore, he is easy to read in a relaxed voice (εὐαναγγέλωστον μὲν εἶναι τῇ[ς φων[ῆς] ύφεμένης) and when the voice is not too raised; <. . . his style. . . > even chokes the speaker by its periods; and by eliminating delivery, it is almost the opposite of the style required in politics.

One who is going to manage political affairs should be steeped in a political and oratorical style, not a sedentary style that only whispers its speech (μὴ τὴν ἐπιδίψηρον καὶ καταψευθυρίζουσαν τὸν λόγον).

Indeed, [Hieronymous] says, it is like someone putting on a big, bearded mask and then speaking in a child’s voice (παιδέου φωνῆ), *** if you try to advise the Greeks and adopt the formal style and techniques of a public orator but then retreat to the voice of a boy trained to read who is incapable of supplying any tonality (volume?), emotion, or [rousing] delivery (μὴ τὸν [μ.mouseup] θαδὸς μήθη ὑπόκρισιν)

(Philodemus, De rhet. 4=PHerc. 1007 col. 16a5-18a8; trans. White adapted) (cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, On Isocrates 13)

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** This Demetrius is usually supposed to be Demetrius of Phaleron. Dem. Phal. fr 169 Werhli.
*** Cf. “Longinus” on use of lofty diction: “Truly beautiful words are the very light of thought. However, their majesty is not for common use, since to attach great and stately words to trivial things would be like fastening a great tragic mask on a little child” (Subl. 30.2)