

Synesius' Dio and the limits of the philosophical essay

In this paper, I explore the politics of certain of Dio Chrysostom's writings from the perspective of late antiquity's most unabashed imitator and careful reader of Dio, Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 370-415). Synesius' emulous rivalry with Dio is most explicit in his *Praise of Baldness*, and is also apparent in his "speech" *De Regno* and essay *De Providentia*. But in this paper I focus on how Synesius reworks the Dionic imperial philosophical *logos* into the late antique philosophical epistle, which became a prized venue for political theorizing in the fourth century empire.

I begin by examining Synesius' portrayal of the Prusan rhetor as a master of philosophical *politikos logos*, in his essay *Dio, or Life According to his Model*. This essay, sent to Hypatia, may take its cue from Dio 18 (Περὶ Λόγου Ἀσκήσεως). I show how, for Synesius, Dio's philosophical speaking and writing practice can be summed up by the figure of Proteus, as an allegory of the model philosophical gentleman who can relate to both idiot and initiate with equal facility (*Dio*, 6.2). Synesius is likely riffing off of Dionysius of Halicarnassus' discussion of the Protean style of Demosthenes, another master of *politikos logos* (*On Demosthenes* 8). But Synesius' Dio, in this figure, conceals the mysteries of philosophy by his very skill at affecting ἀπλότης - a strategy he ascribes also to Plato's *Phaedrus* and to Socrates (in *Letter* 154, to Hypatia), and implicitly to himself as Dio's successor.

I propose that Synesius modeled his own epistolographic practice on his interpretation of the essence of Dionic *politikos logos*. For Synesius, the *Euboicus* (Or. 7) was (*pace* Philostratus) the most philosophical of Dio's speeches (*Dio* 2.1-3.1; cf Philostratus *VS* 487). While several of his writings touch on it, its influence is perhaps most profound in his letter 148, a rustic essay on his home country of Cyrenaica, sent to his friend Olympius in Syria. I trace how Synesius, in the letter, reworks the dialogic form of the *Euboicus* in order to model his own character variously off of Dio and the rustic huntsman in that speech. Cyrenaica is thus, on the one hand, a place of quintessentially Greek virtue. But Synesius also draws on elements of Dio's 13th oration (as well as Herodotus, Antonius Diogenes, and others) in order to portray his Cyrenaica as a land on the extreme outskirts of Hellenism – indeed, as the far off destination of Dio's exile. Synesius herein exploits one of the key generic markers of the letter (the distance of the author) in order to question the spatial priorities of Greek identity.

Reading Dio with Synesius can shed new light on the rhetorical function of intimacy and personal characterization in the imperial philosophical essay. For Synesius too was both a theorist and practitioner, and his private epistles were performances aimed at an imperial rhetorical culture that still shares much with the earlier sophistic centuries. I close with observations on the politics of promoting Dio in the contemporary Alexandrian context in which Synesius operated.

Select Bibliography

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