Sophistic Impressions of the Hermaphrodite as Dissident Intellectual

Through Danilo Kis

This paper argues that alienation of the intellectual is informed by theories of the First and Second Sophistic as well as of post-Marxists. By cycling through provisional historical groupings of the disconnected term “sophists,” we see how the waves have evolved to create sophistic impressions of the hermaphrodite. Next I demonstrate how the hermaphrodite is envisioned in post-Marxist conceptions of species-being, which postmodern critics contend have created a contradiction between desire and reason. Evidence for this involved with identity politics and subsequent alienation of the intellectual. Lastly, after Danilo Kis’s novel *Hourglass* and is adduced as evidence for alienation of the intellectual, I conclude by assessing counter-arguments.

1. First and Second Sophistic Waves

Gorgias of Leontini (5th century BCE) is classified among the First Sophists. Scott Consigny understands Gorgias’s rhetoric as being attached to *community*: “Gorgias ... sees [intellectuals] as being fashioned through participation in the institutions and customs of their community, and ... he construes the community as a contingent association of individuals held together by shared activities rather than by ethnicity or adherence to fixed moral principles.”¹ The intellectual represents social interactions constituting him as an essence shaped by others, as a figure of the community. Consigny
shows that in what begins to emerge as an egalitarian way of thinking, sophists are little concerned with the rhetoric of individuality and self-fulfillment.

Rosamond Kent Sprague recalls “an illustration of the warning issued to the sophists by Socrates ... ‘to be careful not to talk in front of a large group; the listeners are likely to master (the eristic technique) right away and give you no credit.’”² It is ironic that, despite the necessity of egalitarian thought as means of emphasizing public speech, intellectuals like Gorgias are overpowered by marginalization. While Sprague continues Consigny’s thought, it is important to consider the relationship between alienation and its beginning stages in the first sophistic wave.

It was not always safe to be a sophist, since dissidence was a key characteristic of the profession. The marginalization of the intellectual is a common theme in the literature of “sophists.” While James Stuart Murray argues that “twin sophistic claims to answer any question put to them and to speak more briefly than anyone else” are misconstrued [as being] a Socratic method in use before Plato,³ G. B. Kerferd stakes an opposing claim: “It is true that [Protagoras] declares that they concealed their activities and did not declare themselves as sophists. But Protagoras is using the term in its later sense of professional teacher of virtue.”⁴ These claims demonstrate the problem in classifying the “sophists” under an umbrella term; while Murray seeks to eliminate any sense of uniqueness in their rhetorical approach, Kerferd rehabilitates the sophistic position through praise of their teaching abilities.
The hermaphroditic aspect of the intellectual comes across in the age of the Second Sophistic during the 2nd century CE. This era, famously chronicled by Philostratus in *The Lives of the Sophists*, was “eclipsed for centuries ‘because there were no decent speakers’ (in which line ‘decent’ means ‘well to do’).” While Philostratus’s aim in writing the book is to assemble anecdotes and criticisms, Maud Gleason demonstrates that he employs negation as a rhetorical strategy. This shows through in the perspective of Favorinus:

Favorinus boasted of himself as anomalous; evidently he thought of himself as unique. He seems to have generated his identity from contradictions. As a philosopher, he stressed the instability of human knowledge. He defended the Academic practice of arguing both sides of the same question and attacked the Stoics’ claim for the reliability of sense-perception.

Gleason cites Favorinus as a playful rhetorician of the Second Sophistic. Victor J. Vitanza argues that Favorinus’ discourse goes beyond rational argument, that it is “fully open to flights and fugues of the imagination.” Favorinus represents the Second Sophistic in his desire to liberate discourse. However, I want to make a clear distinction here. A “Third Sophistic” emerges as extension of the First and Second waves, and
Favorinus, as the most atypical of the Second Sophists and as a physical hermaphrodite, consequently represents the Third.

2. Critical and Post-Marxist Rhetorics

There is reason to view post-Marxist rhetorics in light of the First and Second Sophistic waves, as with reference to libidinal economy Georges Bataille, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Louis Althusser suggest. I argue that the marginalized intellectual is a hermaphroditic creature—a Dionysian figure subject to fragmentation and ultimately, banishment.\(^8\)

The language of the intellectual gets lost through the discourse of one critic refers to as the restrictive economy. Bataille discusses the catastrophe that occurs on a global scale when products that have been created in excess are destroyed. Although we are led to reabsorb part of the value through leisure time, “these diversions have always been inadequate: Their existence in excess ... has perpetually doomed multitudes of human beings and great quantities of useful goods.”\(^9\) Bataille blames this waste of precious resources on the shift towards restrictive economy, one that is “doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit.”\(^10\) Bataille calls for a drastic rethinking of economic production that avoids producing more product than is needed—and in so doing, subsumes national views to those of a general economy that focuses on a global re-negotiation of ecological waste.
The reason for discussing Bataille’s economies here is twofold. For one thing, it is a way to create adjacency between Marxist political economy and its desire-laden counterpart, *libidinal economy*. For another, from Lyotard’s biting critique of Marx emerges a libidinal economy, which intersects with Bataille’s understanding of the evils of excessive spending in a non-communal, individualistic society. Lyotard compares the libidinal economy to a Moebian band, “a labour which prints these particular folds and twists, the effect of which is a box closed upon itself, filtering impulses and allowing only those to appear on the stage which come from ... the exterior.”11 The libidinal economy is the center of the hermaphrodite’s intellectual discourse; at the same time, it is what binds *hem* to the world by restricting *hir* to strictly individualist lines of thought.

The analogy of the Moebian band expresses the development of the intellectual as a hermaphrodite. Lyotard emphasizes this point by cajoling the Marxist: “the little girl Marx, offended by the perversity of the polymorphous body of capital, requires a great love ... Karl Marx, assigned the task of [prosecuting] the perverts and the ‘invention’ of a suitable lover (the proletariat), sets himself to study the file of the accursed capitalist.”12 Lyotard uses the metaphor of the detective and the little girl to demonstrate how scandal occurs the detective’s quest becomes objectified. Because Marx appears as a little girl caught on the Moebian band, Lyotard argues that the proletariat’s struggle is a heist that provides for nothing more than the illusion of equality: “You believe that there is an exchange, says the little girl Marx, but under all exchanges of equal value there is an original gift, an irreversible relation of inequality, making all equalities ... illusory.”13 I
claim that this is the fate of the intellectual as well—by being termed an outcast for hir playfulness, s/he becomes ignored and thus marginalized.

Confirming this claim, a more accurate representation of the hermaphrodite as a societal reject is outlined in Foucault’s *Herculin Barbin*, where the author in the memoirs of a hermaphrodite details imposition of sexual norms. As Patricia Caplan notes, “*Herculin Barbin* is a paean to the ‘happy limbo to a non-identity’ and a warning of the dire consequences of insisting upon a true identity hidden behind the ambiguities of outward appearance ... Identity becomes an imposition.”¹⁴ Just as the hermaphrodite is completely pushed from the scene as a person living on the edge of what is perceived to “normal,” so the intellectual—as a broken off individual excluded from the concept of the whole—is lost upon the sea of normalized appearances, doomed to the nether-regions of society.

Althusser seeks to answer this contradiction in terms by focusing on what he sees as the failure of the Marxist revolution: “The oversight ... is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but the sight itself.”¹⁵ If this is the case, then we must look back to Walter Benjamin’s reminder to analyze the reflection of the neon sign and not the sign itself. Thus the oversight is one “that concerns vision: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision.”¹⁶ The analogy of vision emphasizes both passive spectacle and active engagement between the discourse-object (labor force) and the discourse (capitalist superstructure); at the same time, it places species-being within the realm of vision, which will be significant as we move on to the visionary nature of Kis’s writing.
The importance of Althusser’s argument is to show the lens through which intellectuals have been regarded. By calling for a paradigmatic shift in thinking about political economy, one that uses the analogy of vision to formulate a mode of reasoning based on production, we need to re-view the intellectual as one who has been alienated: “We must completely reorganize the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production” (emphasis added).¹⁷ This is an important shift in Althusser’s reconstituting of Marxist thought in that he replaces its core concept, money, with knowledge—and the intellectual’s brand of knowledge becomes cultural capital. According to the Althusserian brand of Marxism, then, knowledge may be seen as being both a tangible product plus an abstract means of negotiation.

3. Transition: Identity Politics

In Outside the Teaching Machine, Spivak covers a lot of ground adducing both her own and Derrida’s work to critique Marxism, to establish paradox, and to re-conceive community. One way she does so is by referring to the danger of identity politics, which she argues is one of Marxism’s intentional consequences: “Identitarianism can be as dangerous as it is powerful, and the radical teacher in the university can hope to work, however indirectly, toward controlling the dangers by making them visible.”¹⁸ While Spivak is a proponent of radical teaching at the university, she warns against the danger of its inherent politicizing. By arguing that identity politics unintentionally creates
boundaries, Spivak implies that academic Marxism carries serious antidestabilization consequences for the curriculum.

Coupled with this fatal flaw is the construct of alienation shared with reactionary theorists. Spivak continues, “A word to name the margin. Perhaps that is what the audience wanted to hear: a voice from the margin. If there is a buzzword in cultural critique now, it is ‘marginality.’ Every academic knows that one cannot do without labels.”

Spivak’s critique of academic Marxism is twofold: (1) by referring to it as “cultural critique” she notes the narrowness of its contextual specificity; on the other hand, (2) conservatives downplay marginality, on the same level as identity politics. While Theresa Ebert has rebutted Spivak’s work, arguing for what has been construed as the failure of identity politics, I argue that Spivak’s valuable contributions to the discussion of identity politics outweigh such criticism. This is confirmed in Kis’s work, which embodies the theories discussed so far by demonstrating that the intellectual is both an alienated figure and a dissident.

4. Kis, Transnational Identity, and Counter-Arguments

In Kis’s novel Hourglass, E.S. is a character whose fate has already been decided for him; he is a Jew whose family was murdered in the Holocaust. The reader is forced to put the pieces of his life together, and given that the audience is provided with an array of fragmented narratives ranging from interrogation scenes to deranged mental wanderings, the facts of E.S.’s life are not easy to ascertain. Kis effects this by intermittently shifting between third person omniscient and first person narratives; by doing so, he presents
the story in such a way as to capture the sympathy of the reader as we relive the experience of E.S. The philosophical laboriousness of Kis’s narrative gives the novel a Kunderaesque presence, an alienatory confinement within the restrictive economy of the very text.

On the other hand, the characters appear to be almost as unrealistic as they are realistic, and this is precisely for the same reason: it seems almost impossible for outcasts on the lower rungs of the social ladder ever really to succeed. As Branko Gorjup points out, “Kis formulates his plots from historically and politically relevant material, from those referents that stem from an actual political world.” Gorjup argues that it is Kis’s lived experience that allows him to re-create the Event.

*Is not the idea of an alienated intellectual historically specific?* Numerous authors from Central and Eastern Europe suffered oppression because of their work. Danilo Kis, whose work up to now has not been critically studied in the English language, stands out from those other writers because he wrote throughout the 70s and 80s as an alienated intellectual. Moreover, he died at a critical point in CEE history, right before the break-up of Yugoslavia. I believe that the present moment signals a crucial time to speak about the intellectual again.

*Is not the idea of an alienated intellectual a feature of late modernism?* The theory of alienation at an intellectual level does stem from that earlier period, and s/he may be seen as a leftover from a bygone age. Kis, however, transcends his temporal setting because
of his narrative strategy, which is very fragmented and lends itself well to post-structuralist analysis. The broken-up nature of his writing makes him comparable to contemporary postmodern writers.

**Who are some other alienated intellectuals relevant to this work?** According to Haidar Eid:

Conscious organic intellectuals—to use Gramsci's term (1986)—bear the Palestinian past as, what Said calls, “scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised versions of the past tending towards a post-colonial future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance, from the colonist.”

Eid discusses the role of the intellectual as described by Gramsci and Said. Alienated intellectuals are persons who have been shunned from the system, including critical theorists interested in changing the state of the world but who are oppressed for doing so. Confined to the ivory tower, intellectuals are often seen as disconnected from the rest of the world. But I am interested in exploring *how* intellectuals, through their (mis)perceived disconnection, are alienated. In addition to Said and Gramsci, Bhaba’s
elitism that stems from being a Parsi and a Harvard scholar also exemplifies the alienated intellectual as an isolated fragment.

*How does an alienated intellectual differ from an immigrant?* While many expatriates happen to be intellectuals, not all intellectuals are immigrants. While ethnicity may play a key role with many of the scholars in my project of study, it is often a position of subalternity that dictates the identity of transnational authors, causing them to be overlooked. As Judith Butler notes,

Spivak deftly opposes the “migrant intellectual” approach to the study of alterity. In its places she insists upon a practice of cultural translation that resists the appropriation of dominant power and engages in the specificity of writing within subaltern sites in the idiomatic and vexed relation to the effacements of cultural erasure and cultural appropriation.\(^{23}\)

Kis’s identity as a transnational writer reinforces the idea that the intellectual is alienated, since he lived in France as a displaced Yugoslavian. This project considered the theme of immigration as being simply one aspect of the more comprehensive subalternity of the alienated intellectual.
It is difficult to determine the extent to which early Sophistic and post-Marxist rhetorics share common ground. My approach is different from other researchers in that my aim is to create a pathway between them in terms of what happens to the intellectual as a marginalized hermaphrodite. The aim of this section is to study the literature of the oppressed. The intention of this project is to begin establishing commonalities between these categories that will refine methods of critical inquiry to apply to literary study and critical pedagogies.

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1 Scott Consigny, Gorgias: Sophist and Artist (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2001), 119.


10 Ibid., 25.


12 Ibid., 96.

13 Ibid., 141.


16 Ibid., 21.

17 Ibid., 24.


19 Ibid., 55.


