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Inventing the Second Sophistic: Philostratus and his Dissenters

On the subject of the Second Sophistic and its inventor, Philostratus, the historian has essentially two views to choose between. One, represented in Bowersock's classic *Greek Sophists* (1969), assumes that for all Philostratus's limitations, he reflects a genuine efflorescence of Greek oratory and the men who practiced it. The other, revived by Brunt in a provocative article (*BICS* 1994), views the sophistic renaissance of the second century as an illusion created by the narrowness of Philostratus's vision. Since Brunt's article, scholarly attention has largely shifted away from the question of the reality of the Second Sophistic to consider instead the self-fashioning of sophists themselves. Thus far, however, that attention has not been turned back upon their chronicler. Yet, for better or worse, our understanding of the Second Sophistic is inextricably bound up with the person of its creator. I will argue that the only way to make sense of Philostratus's "creation" of the Second Sophistic is to see it as a form of self-fashioning.

To understand the *Lives of the Sophists*, we must bear in mind that, unlike Aelius Aristides, Lucian, or even Aulus Gellius, Philostratus is not an active participant in the second-century literary culture he describes, but a Severan author positioning himself with reference to and in terms of a movement whose zenith he places before his birth, in the Antonine period. Seen through the lens of Severan ideology, the Antonine age was "a kingdom of gold from which we descend into an age of rust and iron" (D.C. 72.36.4). This golden age provides, as golden ages do, both an ideal model for the present and authorization for its recognized successors. For Philostratus, it was the great new age of sophists, when superstar orators "conversed with cities as their superior, emperors as not their inferior, and gods as their equal" (VS 535). This Second Sophistic, in his eyes, was a self-contained and self-generating movement, admired by audiences, patrons and emperors, but not constituted or controlled by them. He thus casts his addressee, Gordian, as a wholehearted fan of sophistic oratory, but one who, like any fan, stands on the outside looking in on a world that only a sophist can show him. Moreover, this self-contained world is generated not so much by pure talent as by professional connections: Philostratus's canon of modern sophists is based almost entirely on three interlocking networks of teachers and students, centered on his heroes, Herodes Atticus, Polemo and Hadrian of Tyre (Anderson 1986). These networks constitute a self-perpetuating "circle of sophists" (VS 514) that is insulated from outside influences; it is also a circle in which Philostratus himself occupies a privileged place: his teachers were taught by Hadrian, who was in turn a student of Herodes. Like Septimius Severus, Philostratus is authorized by a pedigree that goes back to the Antonine golden age.

In that sense, Brunt is right: Philostratus's Second Sophistic is an idiosyncratic construct, in which his authority as historian and sophist is deeply invested. Yet that construct would have no resonance, and hence no authorizing power, if it were entirely without foundation. The idealized cultural world in which he locates himself is no more artificial than the worlds that Gellius, Lucian and Aristides inhabit in their works. The sophists of the *Lives*, too, aggressively create "circles of sophists" for and around themselves through their alliances and quarrels. It is precisely in this method of construction that the value of

Philostratus's Second Sophistic lies. His imagining of the cultural history of the second century is selective and distorted, but in fashioning himself in terms of such a partial, partisan vision, he is entirely typical of his age.