Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison by Marsh H. McCall Jr. (Loeb Classical Monographs.) Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. xii + 259. $8.50.

The most impressive aspect of this book is its careful analysis of the ancient testimony on comparison from the pre-Aristotelians to the second century A.D.. Professor McCall gathers a vast body of evidence, arranges it in a reasonably coherent fashion and subjects the whole of it to careful scrutiny. Considering the wealth of material and the technical nature of the subject, one might fear that the monograph would approach unreadability; mercifully, however, McCall writes in a clear and unpretentious style. The student of classical rhetoric, no doubt, will delight in the unravelling of the evidence, in the sifting and sorting of difficult technical terms.

The major argument which emerges is that ancient rhetoric does not admit simile as an independent figure of comparison in the manner of modern literary criticism. Greek and Latin rhetorical terms such as εἰκών, εἰκασία, ὁμοίωσις, παραβολή, collatio, comparatio, imago and similitudo are often translated as "simile" in English. McCall, however, notes that in English usage, simile is defined by its formal characteristic of self-announced comparison; that is, a simile is distinct from a metaphor because of the presence of the explicit verbal indicators "like" or "as" or some similar word. The book attempts to demonstrate that the corpus of ancient literature does not provide a formal definition of simile. Rather, the Greek and Roman rhetoricians make a broad distinction between metaphor, and subdivide comparison, as an element of both proof and embellishment, on the basis of purpose, scope and method of use.

Some criticisms of the main thesis might be raised, particularly in respect to the treatment of Aristotle and On Style, but on balance this work is a substantial contribution to the correct interpretation of ancient rhetorical terminology. Certainly anyone who reads the book will flinch when he sees παραβολή or similitudo translated as "simile," and will think several times before using "simile" to turn any Greek or Latin word into English.

Nevertheless, the work suffers from certain weaknesses which require comment. In the first place, there are some problems of presentation. While the general thesis is clearly and cogently argued, too often it is difficult to follow the line of the sub-arguments. Part of the problem arises from the subject matter itself, but part of it also results from the overly rigid adherence to the chronological
method of organization. The reader is immersed in a flood of technical language which shifts subtly in meaning from one ancient authority to the next, and all the authorities are studied in chronological isolation. The short internal summaries are not sufficient to hold the details of the arguments together, although something is salvaged by the brief but clear summary chapter. Such recurrent themes as the relationship between metaphor and comparison, the classification of types of comparison and the correlation between argumentative and stylistic comparisons are obscured by a mass of detail, some of it trivial. The core of the problem is not the lack of immediate clarity for the reader, but a symptom of what I consider the primary fault of the book—its concentration on detail to the exclusion of larger and more interesting questions.

In virtually every chapter, McCall’s investigations of particulars opens the way to questions of more general significance. He notes, for example, that Aristotle treats comparisons of proof and comparisons of style as entirely distinct categories. The same tendency appears in all the other classical rhetoricians up to Quintilian, who obviously perceives the interrelation between the two concepts, but does not carry it out to an abstract general theory of comparison. One wonders about the significance of such a separation. Would it not seem apparent that argumentative and stylistic comparisons operate on the same principle? Why are such philosophic thinkers as Aristotle and Cicero unable or unwilling to correlate these concepts? What does this tell us about ancient theories of comparison or about classical rhetoric in general? McCall unfortunately does not even raise any of these questions.

In another context, our author explicitly recognizes that when comparison and metaphor are linked together, the Greeks generally make metaphor the generic term, but the Latins are inclined to do the opposite. This observation brings to mind a number of questions about the difference between Greek and Roman approaches to figurative language, but again, they are completely ignored. The problem is all the more annoying because, in his preface, McCall announces that he intends to do more than explore the narrow question of whether the ancients conceived of simile as an independent figure. He also wishes to focus on what the use of comparative terms tells us about the general conception of comparison in antiquity. Yet, when he does turn to the larger issues, his remarks are merely taxonomic; he makes distinctions between authors, but fails to draw out their implications. In place of broader interpretations, we are confronted with analyses which do little to advance the argument of
the book, e.g. the *pro forma* citations from Dionysius Thrax and Philodemus.

It is necessary to repeat again that this book is a great success by the normal standards of a monograph. My criticism is not so much about what it includes as what it excludes. Perhaps such criticism is unfair, indicating no more than that the author and reviewer disagree about what is important. But perhaps there is a larger issue as well. Ancient theories of artistic prose remain one of the most lively and intriguing elements of the classical tradition. Their longevity as something other than an historical curiosity is remarkable. No modern scientist, for instance, would label himself as an "Aristotelian physicist", but there exists a large and active fraternity of literary critics and rhetoricians who still style themselves as "Aristotelian". Under the circumstances, one might hope for a special effort on the part of students of ancient rhetorical theory. Surely, as McCall realizes, the subject is too complex to be left to the mercy of dilettantes, but on the other hand, it is also too important to be the sole possession of a small band of specialists.

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We may be permitted to quote from the Preface: "Many recall only one book about him: H.V. Morton's deservedly famous *In the Steps of St. Paul*. But that was a travelogue, not a biography, and written in the very different conditions of the mid-30's ... I felt therefore it would not be impertinent for a biographer to accept the New Testament as I had accepted the boxes of letters and papers which had formed the source material of my other subjects, use it in the same way, and see what happened."

The emergent picture differs markedly from that of Nietzsche who called Paul "one of the most ambitious of men, whose superstition was only equalled by his cunning, a much tortured, much to be pitied man, an exceedingly unpleasant person both to himself and to others"; of the Victorian Dean Farrar by whom he was portrayed as "loftily superior, disdaining moral weaknesses, above ordinary passions, a saint in cold marble"; of Basil Mathews who made him a "muscular Christian, a boy's hero"; as also of Sholem