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Prose versus Poetry in Early Greek Theories of Style

Abstract: The rise of prose in Greece has been linked to broader cultural and intellectual developments under way in the classical period. Prose has also been characterized as challenging poetry's traditional status as the privileged expression of the culture. Yet throughout the classical period and beyond, poetry was still regularly invoked as the yardstick by which innovation was measured. This paper investigates how poetry figures in the earliest accounts of prose style. Focusing on Isocrates, Alcidas, and Aristotle, it argues that although each author distinguishes between the styles of prose and poetry, none is able to sustain the distinction consistently. The criteria for what constitutes an acceptable level of poeticity in prose were unstable. Moreover, the diverse conceptions of poetic style were tied to intellectual polemics and professional rivalries of the early- to mid-fourth century BCE and reflect competing aims and ideals for rhetorical performance in prose.

THE EMERGENCE OF PROSE IN CLASSICAL GREECE

It is often said that poetry precedes prose, at least as a self-conscious or artistic mode of verbal performance and literary composition. In the case of ancient Greece, this claim appears to have considerable merit. While there is ample evidence of a rich tradition of oral and written verse stretching back into the archaic period, recent scholarship has emphasized the fact that formal prose was a comparatively late development, an "invention" properly associated with the classical period. More than this, the emergence of prose has been held out as an emblem for

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the so-called Greek enlightenment of the fifth- to fourth-centuries BCE, and as a crucial factor in the broader cultural and intellectual developments under way in that period: the advance of literacy, the initiation of new kinds of historical, philosophical, and scientific inquiry, and, in Athens, the quasi-institutional hardening of forms and forums of political and forensic speechmaking as well as the introduction of formal instruction in rhetoric.¹

The classical period has thus been characterized as the first great age of prose, in which the oral performance and written composition of unmetred *logoi* challenged and over time largely supplanted traditional poetic forms as the privileged expression of the culture. Simon Goldhill's account is representative:

[I]n archaic Greece, what's *authoritative*, what *matters*, is performed and recorded *in verse* . . . [W]hether you turn to politics or to the most intense intellectual enquiry, whether you talk of war or sex, religion or travel, moral advice or subsistence farming, any text of importance is produced in poetry . . . But [in the fifth century,] political theory, scientific theory, the arts of rhetoric and of medicine, the writing of philosophy and of history are all inaugurated . . . Each of these revolutionary practices is conducted in prose. . . . And after the fifth century, almost all serious philosophy, history, medicine, mathematics, theology—the sciences of authority—are conducted solely in prose.

Over the course of the classical period, Goldhill concludes, "prose becomes . . . the medium for authoritative expression, the expression of power."²

¹See Thomas Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Simon Goldhill, *The Invention of Prose*, Greece & Rome New Surveys in the Classics, no. 32 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); D. A. Russell, *The Place of Poetry in Ancient Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); and for a wider ranging study of the "emergence of prose," Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), esp. pp. ix-xx, 3-10, 187-194. Several recent studies reconsider the dating of early Greek oratorical *Kunstprosa*: Michael J. Edwards, "Antiphon and the Beginnings of Athenian Literary Oratory," *Rhetorica* 18 (2000): 227-242; Stephen Usher, *Greek Oratory: Tradition and Originality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355-359. For a reassessment of the early, now fragmentary, prose of the natural philosophers and Hecataeus of Miletus, see André Laks, "Écriture, prose, et les débuts de la philosophie grecque." *Methodos* 1 (2001): 131-51; Charles H. Kahn, "Writing Philosophy: Prose and Poetry from Thales to Plato," in Harvey Yunis ed., *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139-161.

²Goldhill, *Invention of Prose*, 1, 3-4, 5 (emphases in original). See also Cole, *Origins of Rhetoric*, 28-29; Godzich and Kittay, *Emergence of Prose*, 6-8.

Despite the evidence for prose's ascendancy, however, it is clear that poetry and the poetic tradition continued to exert a pervasive influence on the thought of the period. George Kennedy observes that "'prose' assumes the prior existence of 'poetry.'"³ By this he means that the concept or idea of prose is tied to the recognition of its divergence from verse. It can hardly be coincidence that the great age of prose was equally a period of serious reflection on prose. The rhetoricians were the first to engage in such reflection and their habits of thought reveal the truth of Kennedy's statement. When the early teachers of the art of speech sought to describe the forms of prose and the techniques for making prose effective, they almost invariably began by drawing comparisons or, more often, asserting contrasts between prose and poetry. This is understandable given that poetry constituted the dominant literary precedent; indeed, in the earliest period, it was the only verbal art form preserved in substantial numbers of texts that could be studied as models for the production of works in prose. Moreover, the Greek language did not come ready-fitted with a proper equivalent for the modern term "prose."⁴ Rather than invent one, however, the rhetoricians were evidently satisfied to understand their object in negative terms, as not-poetry or non-verse, and to discriminate between prose and poetry primarily at the level of expression or style.

This negative and basically formal conception of prose, though pervasive in antiquity and widespread even today, has been a source of confusion. It both assumes and asserts a distinction that proves to be illusory. As Steve Nimis remarks, the definition of prose as non-verse "makes prose a very unstable category. . . . If prose is the 'other' of verse, then what prose is depends on what 'verse' is, and this is not a stable category either."⁵

This essay traces this confusion of notions to its origins in the complex and sometimes inconsistent ways in which poetry figures in the earliest accounts of Greek prose style. It consists of two parts. In the first, I discuss the opposition to an overly poetic style of

³George A. Kennedy, "The Evolution of a Theory of Artistic Prose," in George A. Kennedy ed. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 184–199 (p. 184), echoing Gregory Nagy, "Early Greek Views of Poets and Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, 1–77 (p. 8).

⁴See Godzich and Kittay, *Emergence of Prose*, 192–193.

⁵Steve Nimis, "The Prosaics of the Ancient Novels," *Arethusa* 27 (1994): 387–411 (p. 397). Compare Richard Lanham's pronouncement: "Nothing but confusion has ever come from the effort to fix the poetry-prose boundary" in Lanham, *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 65.

prose, a prohibition that appears frequently in the fourth-century and in authors as diverse as Isocrates, Alcidamas, and Aristotle. In the second part, I examine the relevant texts more closely to show that—despite its frequent reiteration—the basic distinction between poetic and appropriately prosaic language is extremely tenuous. In fact, none of the three figures I focus on is able to sustain it consistently. In the course of the analysis, I attempt to explain the failure to maintain a neat separation of prose and poetic styles in each of the three authors. While the major differentiae of poetic style remained fairly constant, they were applied and evaluated in different, sometimes incompatible ways in relation to the new art of written, oratorical prose. Consequently, the criteria for what constitutes an acceptable level of poeticality in prose were unsteady, varying in relation to specific genres of oratory but also in more subtle ways. Further, the diverse conceptions of poetic style that result were closely tied to the intellectual polemics and professional rivalries of the early- to mid-fourth century and reflect different, competing aims and ideals for rhetorical performance in prose.⁶

PROSE CONTRA POETRY

Greek self-consciousness regarding verbal style can be discerned, and at a fairly sophisticated level, in the later fifth century. The classic early expression of stylistic discriminations applies specifically to poetry, appearing in Aristophanes' comparison, criticism, and parody of the language of the tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides in the *Frogs*.⁷ This literary precedent, combined with poetry's traditional

⁶Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) reconsiders the classical origins of "conventional poetry / rhetoric distinctions" (p. 11), but does not address the stylistic distinctions between verse and prose at the center of early reflections on the two modes of expression. Similarly, Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002)—despite the promising sub-title of chapter 10 ("Theories of Prose and the Theory of Poetry")—does not interrogate the distinction between poetry and prose, nor treat the ancients' perception of stylistic differences (and similarities) between the two.

⁷On the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs* 905–1446 and its significance for early literary criticism and style theory, see Fritz Robert Wehrli, "Der Erhabene und der schlichte Stil in der poetisch-rhetorischen Theorie der Antike," in *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühl*, ed. Olof Gigon et al. (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1946), 9–34 (pp. 13–14, 23–25); G. M. A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics*

status as the culture's preeminent verbal art form, should lead one to expect that poetry would enter into reflections on the language of prose from the beginning. This expectation is fully satisfied. The sophist Gorgias set little store in the distinction between prose and poetry, defining poetry as simply "logos with meter" (*Helen* 9). This early, basic differentiation between prose and poetry is echoed, possibly in mildly parodic fashion, by Plato, whose Socrates suggests that when a verse composition is "stripped of melody, rhythm, and meter" all that remains is *logoi*.⁸ Although meter regularly appears in subsequent authors as the one quality decisively separating poetry from prose,⁹ Gorgias' evocation of this standard has plausibly been interpreted as ancillary to the sophist's larger effort to clear the way for his own attempts to invest prose with the dignity and refinement previously associated with verse. This interpretation is consistent with the sophist's contention that persuasion by unmeasured speech is a psychagogic process akin to the auditor's seduction by poetry or incantation.¹⁰

While it is unlikely that Gorgias formulated a technical vocabulary sufficient to describe his own poetic prose with any precision, the ideas on *logos* expressed in the *Helen* as well as the style of that and his other discourses were evidently novel. They were also controversial, at least in the view of certain elite critics and intellectuals. Scenes in Plato's dialogues show how quickly Gorgias' style became

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 22–32; D. A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press / Duckworth, 1995), 20–22, 132–134; Kenneth Dover, ed., *Aristophanes: Frogs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 24–37; and especially Neil O'Sullivan, *Alcidamas, Aristophanes and the Beginnings of Greek Stylistic Theory* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1992), 7–22, 106–150, and *passim*.

⁸Gorgias 502c5–7. A corresponding definition of poetry emerges at *Symposium* 205c, in Diotima's comments on the popular sense of the words *poiēsis* and *poiētēs*—namely, that they are applied to the branch of making "concerned with music and meter" (περὶ τὴν μουσικὴν καὶ τὰ μέτρα); see Ford, *Origins of Criticism*, 133–135.

⁹Prose should be rhythmical, but not metrical: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Demosthenes* 50, *On Composition* 25 (cf. *On Composition* 11); Demetrius, *On Style* 180–181 (cf. 118); Cicero, *Orator* 187–188, 194, 198 (cf. 66–68); Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 9.4.56–57, 60–61, 72, 77. In the Second Sophistic, this prohibition was loosened considerably; see Helen North, "The Use of Poetry in the Training of the Ancient Orator," *Traditio* 8 (1952): 1–33 (pp. 14–16, 31–33).

¹⁰See Charles Segal, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962): 99–155; Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3–22; cf. Ford, *Origins of Criticism*, 172–182. Gorgias likens persuasive speeches to magic spells at *Helen* 10, 14.

the subject of imitation and target of parody.¹¹ Aristotle opens his account of prose *lexis* by voicing open opposition to the style. Early in book 3 of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes that the poets were the first to “set in motion” the study of verbal expression. He then adds that artistic prose began in imitation of the “poetic style” (*poiêtikê* ... *lexis*) and identifies Gorgias as the exemplar of this sort of prose.¹² Though he acknowledges that the Gorgianic manner continues to impress the “majority of the uneducated” (3.1.9 1404a26–27), when Aristotle comes to his own recommendations, he immediately rejects the correlation with poetry. He proclaims that “the style (*lexis*) of prose differs from that of poetry” and that “the poetic style ... is not appropriate for speech” (3.1.9 1404a28, 3.2.1 1404b4–5). In the remaining chapters on rhetorical *lexis* (3.2–12) Aristotle repeatedly warns against exotic language and other poetic devices.

From what we are able to determine from the spotty textual evidence from the period, Aristotle’s was the earliest systematic, properly theoretical account of the subject of prose style.¹³ Even so,

¹¹In the *Symposium* Agathon’s speech on love includes numerous verses and self-references to its “poetical” quality (e.g., *Symposium* 195d, 196d, 196e, 197c; cf. Hermogenes, *On Types of Style* 337). Socrates’ comments after the speech call explicit attention to its Gorgianic style (197b–d); see O’Sullivan, *Alcidamas*, 29–30, and Kenneth Dover, *The Evolution of Greek Prose Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 169–171. In the *Gorgias*, Polus is depicted as an exponent of the Gorgianic manner; see *Gorgias* 448c4–9 with E. R. Dodds, ed., *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), note ad loc. and pp. 9, 11.

¹²*Rhetoric* 3.1.8 1404a19–20, 3.1.9 1404a25–26. Aristotle’s remarks are echoed by other ancient critics (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero, Philostratus), and his placement of Gorgias in a prominent position in the development of prose style has exerted enormous influence on the modern scholarship devoted to the subject. The standard account holds that artistic prose began by adapting devices borrowed from poetry and singles out Gorgias as the crucial figure; see J. D. Denniston, *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 1–22, and Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898; updated, with an Italian translation by B. H. Campana, as *La prosa d’arte antica* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1986)). Cf. also North, “Use of Poetry,” 3–4, Kennedy, “Evolution,” cited in n. 3 above, p. 184. Throughout this paper citations of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* are from Rudolf Kassel, ed., *Aristotelis Ars Rhetorica* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976); translations are based on George A. Kennedy, trans., *Aristotle On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), with alterations indicated.

¹³In addition to O’Sullivan, *Alcidamas*, see George A. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 63–64. The *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* discusses the *lexis* of oratorical prose (chapters 22–28), but does not mention the need to keep the style of oratory separate from that of poetry. In this respect, the *ad Alexandrum* is unusual among fourth-century works dealing with prose style, and for that reason will not figure in the analyses that follow.

Aristotle was not the first to attempt to set the style of oratorical prose apart from that of poetry. In fact, it appears that nearly every fourth-century rhetorician who spoke on the subject made some such distinction, establishing it as a *topos* for the rest of antiquity and beyond.¹⁴

The issue figures prominently in the early- to mid-fourth century debate between Isocrates and Alcidamas—according to tradition, both students of Gorgias¹⁵—both of whom offer variations on the injunction to avoid a poetic style. Isocrates' most direct expression of the prohibition occurs in the *Evagoras* where he explains that poets are allowed many "embellishments" (*kosmoi*) unavailable to the prose writer. These *kosmoi* are related to subject matter but especially to verbal style. In terms of subject, poets can present grand tales featuring interactions between gods and mortals;¹⁶ as regards style, poets "can express themselves not only in conventional language, but also by the use of foreign words, neologisms, and metaphors, neglecting none, but using every kind with which to embroider their poetry."¹⁷ By contrast, "orators [or 'prose authors'] are not permitted the use of such things; they must strictly use both words and ideas [of a certain sort]: of words, only those that are in the [ordinary] language of the *polis*; of ideas, only those that bear closely on the actual facts."¹⁸

This passage, which has been identified as providing the "earliest explicit contrast between poetic and prosaic language,"¹⁹ addresses first word choice or diction, advancing the rather austere demand that prose authors avoid any exotic or unusual terms, including even

¹⁴In addition to the sources listed in n. 9 above, see Cicero, *Orator* 201–202; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.28–29; Demetrius, *On Style* 112.

¹⁵Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Isocrates* 1, *Isaeus* 19; Cicero, *Cato* 12, *Orator* 176; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 3.1.13; Ps-Plutarch, *Isocrates* 2; *Suda* s.vv. Gorgias, Alcidamas; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 592c. Yun Lee Too, *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 235–239 questions Isocrates' association with Gorgias.

¹⁶Cf. Hermogenes, *On Types of Style* 243, 391–393, with Ian Rutherford, *Canons of Style in the Antonine Age: Idea-Theory in Its Literary Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 56–57.

¹⁷*Evagoras* 9; translation adapted from LaRue Van Hook, trans., *Isocrates*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb), 1945).

¹⁸*Evagoras* 10; translation adapted from John T. Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor," *American Journal of Philology* 118 (1997): 517–554 (pp. 523–524).

¹⁹Dover, *Evolution*, cited in n. 11 above, p. 96. *Evagoras* 9 also presents the earliest extant use of the term *metaphora*; see W. B. Stanford, *Greek Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936), 3; Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor," 523.

metaphorai. To these observations on diction, Isocrates adds remarks on the poets' freedom in composition and prosody:

Besides, the poets compose all their works with meter and rhythm (μετὰ μέτρων καὶ ῥυθμῶν), while the orators do not share in any of these advantages; and these lend such charm that even though the poets may be deficient in diction and in thoughts (καὶ τῇ λέξει καὶ τοῖς ἐνθυμήμασιν ἔχῃ κακῶς), yet through these same rhythms and harmonies they bewitch their listeners (ὁμῶς αὐταῖς ταῖς εὐρυθμίαις καὶ ταῖς συμμετρίαις ψυχαγωγοῦσι τοὺς ἀκούοντας). The power of poetry may be understood from this consideration; if one should retain the words and ideas of poems which are held in high esteem, but do away with the meter, they will appear far inferior to the opinion we now have of them.²⁰

In addition to being free to employ all sorts of exotic words, poetry enjoys the benefit of euphony given by meter, rhythm, and other sonic harmonies (*summetriai*, lit. "symmetries"). Again, the contrast here derives from the stylistic freedom granted to poets—call it stylistic license—but not extended to prose authors. As though to offset this apparent disadvantage, and to score a point for the new art of prose, Isocrates adds the jab that poetry's stylistic luxuriance frequently conceals weakness of conception or thought—an idea that Aristotle will echo repeatedly.²¹

The message of *Evagoras* 8–11 is that prose authors operate at a disadvantage when compared to poets, but this can be overcome by effort, restraint, and discipline, such as that which Isocrates claims for himself and his teaching. When we turn to Alcidas, it is thus puzzling to find that Isocrates was himself open to the charge of being overly poetic. In his essay *On Those Who Write Written Speeches, or On the Sophists*, Alcidas argues in support of extemporaneous oratory and against the written composition of speeches, a practice that was gaining momentum in this period.²² Alcidas' basic con-

²⁰*Evagoras* 10; translation adapted from Van Hook.

²¹Aristotle concedes that "poets are allowed . . . a diction which includes loan words, metaphors, and many stylistic abnormalities" (*Poetics* 25 1460b11–13), but also observes that the stylistic luxuriance permitted in poetry can conceal imperfections in the thought. He endorses the manipulation of style to conceal such flaws as a poetic technique at *Poetics* 24 1460b2–5, but criticizes it in Isocratean fashion at *Rhetoric* 3.1.9 1404a24–25, 3.5.4 1407a31–35; cf. Plato, *Republic* 601a–b. Aristotle extends a similar criticism to the sort of oratory written and delivered in epideictic competitions in his day; see *Rhetoric* 3.1.7 1404a16–19.

²²The exact date of Alcidas' speech remains uncertain; see J. V. Muir, ed. and trans., *Alcidas: The Works and Fragments* (London: Bristol Classical Press/Duckworth, 2001), xiv–xv; Ruth Mariss, *Über diejenigen, die schriftliche Reden geschrieben*,

tention concerning style is direct and simple: written prose tends to resemble poetry and its poetic style will not serve the orator in most circumstances calling for persuasion. He complains that written speeches “fashioned with precision with respect to their words resemble poems (*poiēmata*) more than speeches (*logoi*).”²³ Elsewhere he sneers, “I suspect that those who spend their life in this pursuit [the writing of speeches] have failed in *rhêtorikê* and *philosophia*, and I think they would more rightly be called poets than sophists” (*On the Sophists* 2).

Alcidamas argues that the poetic quality of the written speech will be immediately apparent to hearers and may be perceived as a sign of the speaker’s insincerity. As a result, when delivered, a carefully written speech will provoke distrust in the audience and fail to persuade:

[W]hen speeches are fashioned precisely with respect to their words, resembling poems more than *logoi*, have abandoned spontaneity and verisimilitude, and appear to be shaped and composed with much preparation (μετὰ παρασκευῆς ... πεπλάσθαι καὶ συγκεῖσθαι), they fill the minds of the listeners with disbelief (*ἀπιστίας*) and resentment (*φθόνου*).²⁴

The written *logos* may be beautiful when read out of a book, but in the heat of competition in the courts or assembly it will be perceived as false—just as shapely sculptures of stone or bronze are recognized as but idealized imitations of “true” bodies (*μιμήματα τῶν ἀληθινῶν σωμάτων*, 27–28). Elsewhere, as part of his criticism of the artificiality and staginess of carefully written speeches, Alcidamas observes that, when delivered, they call to mind theatrical performance or rhapsodic recitation.²⁵

oder über die Sophisten (Münster: Aschendorf, 2002) 53–55. Nevertheless, it is certain that Alcidamas’ work preceded Aristotle’s analysis of prose style at *Rhetoric* 3. For a more detailed study of the treatise with emphasis on its place in early theory of style, see O’Sullivan, *Alcidamas*, cited in n. 7 above.

²³*On the Sophists* 12, following Blass’ reconstruction of the text; Friedrich Blass, ed., *Antiphontis Orationes* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1881).

²⁴*On the Sophists* 12; translation adapted from Michael Gagarin, trans., “On Those Who Write Speeches, or On Sophists,” in Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff eds., *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 276–283.

²⁵*On the Sophists* 14: καὶ τὰ μὲν ὑποκρίσει καὶ ῥαψωδία παραπλήσια δοκεῖν εἶναι. Here ὑποκρίσει denotes dramatic acting rather than delivery in a broader sense; see Muir, *Alcidamas*, 51.

That Alcidas' statements are nakedly polemical should not lead us to discount his depiction of fourth-century audiences' sensibilities. There is ample corroboration of his claim that written speeches and poetic expressions in political oratory could arouse suspicion. Both techniques apparently carried the suggestion of premeditated deceit. Especially striking evidence is provided by the invective passages in Aeschines and Demosthenes, in which the former mocks the latter for his dependence on a written text and his inability to speak extempore, while the latter chides the former for his habit of quoting poetry and his affiliation with the theater. Even if these charges were not enough to shake these two rhetors from their preferred oratorical methods, both evidently believed that such criticisms would have some effect on their audience.²⁶

Unlike those rhetors, Alcidas does not name his opponents—the teachers and practitioners of this poetic type of written prose—but it seems certain that Isocrates was one, if not the sole, target of his critique.²⁷ This inference is reinforced by a wrinkle that appears in Alcidas' criticism of written speeches. Immediately after asserting that a speech "shaped with precision" will fill the audience with "disbelief and ill will," Alcidas observes in passing that an undesirably precise and poetic style is not a necessary outcome of written composition. He remarks that, "[t]he best evidence for [the undesirability of a poetic style] is that people who write speeches for the lawcourts avoid great precision of expression and imitate instead the style of extemporaneous speakers" (*On the Sophists* 13).²⁸ Although Alcidas

²⁶Demosthenes 18.139, 242, 19.243–250, 337–38. Cf. also Demosthenes 21.191–192; Plutarch, *Demosthenes* 8.2–5; Aeschines 2.34–35. On the Attic orators' use of poetry and the suspicion attached to written speeches and other forms of preparation, see North, "Use of Poetry," cited in n. 9 above, pp. 24–27; H. Ll. Hudson-Williams, "Political Speeches in Athens," *Classical Quarterly* (1951): 68–73; Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 165–182; Jon Hesk, "The Rhetoric of Anti-Rhetoric in Athenian Oratory," in Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne eds., *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 201–230; Johann Schloemann, "Entertainment and Democratic Distrust: The Audience's Attitude toward Oral and Written Oratory in Classical Athens," in Ian Worthington and John Miles Foley eds. *Epea and Grammata: Oral and Written Communication in Ancient Greece* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 133–146.

²⁷See LaRue Van Hook, "Alcidas versus Isocrates: The Spoken versus the Written Word," *Classical Weekly* 12 (1919): 89–94 (pp. 89–91); O'Sullivan, *Alcidas*, cited in n. 7 above (esp. pp. 23–31), and the bibliography in Mariss, *Alcidas*, cited in n.22 above.

²⁸Other, near-contemporary sources likewise advocate that extemporaneous speech should be imitated in the written medium: *P.Oxy.* 410 (Ludwig Radermacher, *Artium scriptores: Reste der voraristotelischen Rhetorik. Oösterreiches Akademie der*

issues many complaints about the practice of speechwriting—simple impracticality, the fact that it dulls one’s mental reflexes, and so forth (*On the Sophists* 9–11, 14–21)—in this passage it is not so much writing as a particular style of writing that Alcidamas opposes. It is a style he describes elsewhere as “crafted carefully in every detail . . . [having] every phrase composed with precision (*akribeia*) and rhythm (*rhuthmos*),” a style “perfected with slow and deliberate thought.”²⁹ It is evidently this style that Alcidamas has in mind whenever he speaks critically of finely written speeches. This explains the awkwardness of his later remark that logographers “appear to write most admirably when they produce speeches least like those that are written,”³⁰ a statement which suggests that the written medium has already come to be closely and widely associated with a distinctive, artificial, poetic style. Thus, if one wishes to write a speech that will be persuasive in the courts or assembly, Alcidamas insists that art should be used not to make something marvelous but to conceal the fact that it is written. This principle—a version of the topos *ars est celare artem*—is crucial to Aristotle’s stylistic theory, but is foreign to Isocrates’, whose style Alcidamas appears to be thinking of whenever he refers to “poetic” written speeches.³¹

In his analysis of prose *lexis* in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle echoes this earlier debate. Like Alcidamas, Isocrates, and others, Aristotle recognizes meter as the standard differentia of poetry.³² More than this, he shares with the earlier authors a framework for stylistic discriminations, that of a continuum from common, everyday spoken language on one end to poetry on the other. Such a range of what might be termed stylistic registers is implied in Aristotle’s definition of the “excellence” or “virtue” of prose style: “Let the virtue (*aretê*) of *lexis*

Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte 227, Band 3 (Vienna, 1951), D. (pp. 231–232)); Ps-Demosthenes, *Eroticus* 2. In his early work as a logographer, even Isocrates did not eschew techniques that give the impression of improvisation; see Alfred P. Dorjahn and William D. Fairchild, “Isocrates and Improvisation,” *Classical Bulletin* 44 (1967): 6–7, 9–10.

²⁹*On the Sophists* 16; translation adapted from Gagarin.

³⁰*On the Sophists* 13; translation adapted from Gagarin.

³¹The *akribeia* and *rhuthmos* that Alcidamas says are characteristic of “poetic” written speeches are the same qualities Isocrates will claim for his own style; see n. 57 below.

³²In the *Poetics* Aristotle rejects meter alone as sufficient to differentiate poetry from prose, possibly responding to Gorgias and Plato; see n. 8 above, and *Poetics* 1 1447a28–b29, 9 1451b1–3, with Dodds, ed., *Plato: Gorgias*, cited in n. 11 above, pp. 324–325. In *Rhetoric* 3, however, Aristotle expresses the conventional view; see *Rhetoric* 3.8.3 1408b30–31.

be defined as to be clear (speech is a kind of sign, so if it does not make clear it does not perform its function)—and neither flat nor excessive, but appropriate.³³ This definition places Aristotle's approved prose style in a sort of mid-range—an Aristotelian mean—between "flatness" and "excess."³⁴ In the elaboration of this ideal, it is everywhere apparent that Aristotle tends to equate the plain expression of meaning with features of colloquial speech and transgressive excess with poetry.

Aristotle states that clarity is achieved chiefly through the use of "standard terms" (*kuria*), that is, common words used in their prevailing senses.³⁵ He remarks that effective metaphors are another means to clarity and that metaphors, too, are frequently used in daily conversation.³⁶ Clarity also comes from several of the techniques Aristotle describes under the heading of *to hellênizein* in a chapter (*Rhetoric* 3.5) that is basically a collection of rules for speaking idiomatic, grammatically sound Greek. Emerging from these sections of Aristotle's account is a conception of naked or unmarked language, a sort of stylistic zero-degree: to speak idiomatic Greek is in itself unremarkable and the common *kuria* are "flat"; metaphors occur naturally in spoken discourse and are not necessarily startling or unique. These elements are, he claims, sufficient to make one's meaning clear and intelligible. From a rhetorical perspective, however, a *lexis* that is only clear is deficient. As Aristotle asserts at 3.2.1–2, style should not be "flat" (*tapeinos*); it needs to have a dignity or distinctiveness raising it above the level of everyday speech. Aristotle goes on to discuss a number of means by which to achieve this distinctiveness

³³*Rhetoric* 3.2.1 1404b1–4: ὀρίσθω λέξεως ἀρετὴ σαφῆ εἶναι (σημεῖον γάρ τι ὁ λόγος, ὥστ' ἐὰν μὴ δηλοῖ οὐ ποιήσει τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἔργον), καὶ μήτε ταπεινὴν μήτε ὑπὲρ τὸ ἄξιωμα, ἀλλὰ πρέπουσαν; translation adapted from Kennedy.

³⁴On the mean in Aristotle's theory of prose style, see G. L. Hendrickson, "The Peripatetic Mean of Style and the Three Stylistic Characters," *American Journal of Philology* 25 (1904): 125–146; Hendrickson, "The Origin and Meaning of the Ancient Characters of Style," *American Journal of Philology* 26 (1905): 249–290; Doreen Innes, "Theophrastus and the Theory of Style," in W. W. Fortenbaugh ed., *Theophrastus of Eresus* (RUSCH 2) (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1985), 251–267. On the continuum of stylistic registers emerging from Aristotle's account, see Stephen Halliwell, "Style and Sense in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Bk. 3," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 47 (1993): 50–69 (pp. 55–58).

³⁵*Rhetoric* 3.2.2 1404b5–6; *Poetics* 22 1458a18–19, 1458a34–1458b5.

³⁶*Rhetoric* 3.2.6 1404b34–35 (cf. *Poetics* 22 1459a12–14); *Rhetoric* 3.2.8 1405a8–9; 3.6.3 1407b31–32; 3.10.7 1411b13. In other works, Aristotle observes that metaphors impede clarity: *Metaphysics* 1.9 991a21–22; 13.5 1079b25–26; *Topics* 6.2 139b32–140a17; cf. *Rhetoric* 3.3.4 1406b8–9; 3.10.6 1410b31–33. The crucial distinction is between good and bad metaphors, ones that clarify or obscure.

or “defamiliarization”³⁷—from the occasional use of non-standard or unusual words, as well as, for example, by the employment of a subtle prose rhythm—but throughout he cautions against the opposite extreme. This extreme of excess is consistently associated with poetry or even designated by the term “poetic.”³⁸

Aristotle’s rationale for the avoidance of a poetic style is two-fold and can be shown to blend arguments advanced by Isocrates and Alcidas. The first reason centers on stylistic propriety and the relationship between style and subject matter. At *Rhetoric* 3.7 Aristotle observes that an appropriate *lexis* will be “proportional” (*analogon*) to the subject matter. The general principle is that a speaker’s language must conform to the dignity of the subject treated: one should not discuss “weighty matters in an off-hand way, [or] paltry things in a solemn manner” (3.7.1 1408a11–13). Elsewhere he invokes the principle to explain the distinction between the diction of poetry and that of prose, explaining that all types of exotic words are appropriate (*harmottei*) in poetry for it treats subjects and depicts characters that are “more extraordinary” (*pleon . . . exestêke*), whereas prose must use a humbler diction because its “subject matter is less remarkable” (*hupothesis elattôn*) (3.2.3 1404b12–13, 17–18).³⁹ This is the same reasoning presented in the passage of the *Evagoras* discussed above, in which Isocrates sets poetry apart from prose on the basis of its greater freedom to treat “ornamental” subjects (*kosmoi*) like the relations of men and gods, and to do so with correspondingly embellished language. Indeed, Aristotle’s message is the same as the one Isocrates articulates in that work: “in speech it is necessary to take special pains to the extent that speech has fewer resources than verse” (3.2.8 1405a6–8).⁴⁰

³⁷See Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric*, cited in n. 12 above, p. 221 with n. 17.

³⁸*Rhetoric* 3.2.1–3 1404b4–17; 3.3 *passim*; 3.4.2 1406b24–25; 3.6.3 1407b31–32; 3.8.3 1408b30–31.

³⁹The idea that style should be attuned to subject matter can be traced to Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. Rejecting Euripidean realism, Aristophanes’ Aeschylus asserts that it is the tragedian’s duty to “adorn the noble deed” for the edification of the audience (1026–1027), and he defends his poetic practice by referring to the inherent solemnity of the subject matter of tragedy and the dignity of the characters represented therein (1058–1061). It is hard to believe that Isocrates and Aristotle did not have Aeschylus’ statement in mind: “[S]ublime ideas and greatness of thought are getters of lofty expression, and, again, demigods as of right should excel mere mortals in grandeur of phrasing, since greater magnificence, too, than our own is the outward mark of their clothing” (1058–1061).

⁴⁰Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue, *Linguistica e stilistica di Aristotele* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1967), 202–204 appears to overstate the difference between Isocrates and Aristotle on this point.

The second part of Aristotle's rationale for the avoidance of poetic style concerns not subject matter, but audience, and here he touches on concerns at the center of Alcidamas' argument on behalf of extemporaneous speaking. Aristotle's conception of stylistic excellence in prose as a mean between the banal register of spoken discourse and the elevated style of poetry might seem at odds with Alcidamas who, as we saw, endorses the style of spontaneous utterance for all types of practical oratory and inveighs against the heightened precision and contrived rhythms of discourses that have been carefully prepared in advance. The apparent disagreement dissolves, however, when Aristotle comes to discuss the effect of style on audiences. In fact, Aristotle agrees completely with Alcidamas that any evidence of artifice renders a discourse unpersuasive to hearers. His account of the audience's response to a contrived style is nearly identical to that of Alcidamas and more colorful: "Authors should compose without being noticed and should seem to speak not artificially but naturally (μη ... πεπλασμένως ἀλλὰ πεφυκότως). (The latter is persuasive, the former the opposite; for [if artifice is obvious] people become resentful, as at someone plotting against them, just as they are at those adulterating wines)" (3.2.4 1404b18–21). Of the many parallels between the Aristotelian and Alcidamantine passages, probably the most striking is verbal, in the cognate terms *peplasthai* (Alcidamas) and *peplasménōs* (Aristotle) used to convey the idea of contrivance or plasticity.⁴¹ Both authors note the audience's tendency to perceive duplicity in a style that has obviously been shaped. As this is so, Aristotle urges that style be, or rather seem, "natural" (δοκεῖν λέγειν ... πεφυκότως). If it is not, the orator will fail to persuade.

In Alcidamas' account, the desired stylistic naturalness would be achieved without effort in the extemporaneous mode of speech composition-performance. In this mode, the main arguments are prepared in advance but can be rearranged, lengthened, or curtailed as the occasion demands. Style is literally an afterthought: the exact wording is left until the moment of speaking (*On the Sophists* 18–19, 22–24). The same effect could be achieved in writing, however, by the artful imitation of extempore speech. The precept *ars est celare artem* hinted at in Alcidamas' treatise proves equally fundamental to Aristotle's stylistic theory. Aristotle nowhere speaks of genuine

⁴¹See also *Rhetoric* 3.8.1 1408b21–23: "The form of the language should be neither metrical nor unrhythmical. The former is unpersuasive (for it seems to have been shaped [πεπλάσθαι]) and at the same time also diverts attention."

improvisatory speech, but his advice on the means to achieve dignity or elevation of style is consistently accompanied by a demand that the rhetor conceal his art.⁴² Hence, Aristotle favors a style that deviates only slightly from that of ordinary conversation,⁴³ and he describes these deviations as calculated specifically with the sensitivities of the mass audience in mind. A successful style utilizes the resources provided by common language in such a way that the audience is "tricked" (*kleptein*) and the style "escapes notice" (*lanthanein*).⁴⁴ Aristotle's images all point to the idea that effective prose style hides in plain sight. Indeed, this is precisely the reason why Aristotle holds metaphor out as so vital to rhetorical prose; metaphors, or rather effective metaphors, bring clarity as well as adding a touch of "strangeness" (*xenikon*), and yet are readily accepted by audiences because they are a manner of speaking that occurs naturally in everyday talk.⁴⁵ So while Aristotle's insistence on elevation above the "usual" (*idiôtikon*) register would initially appear to conflict with Alcidas's preference for improvisatory speech, in fact they agree that stylistic features which reveal artifice will breed distrust in the audience. Both call these features poetic.

THE LICENSING OF PROSE

Some details that do not fit neatly into the framework of stylistic discriminations presented so far suggest inconsistencies in the thought of the individual authors. Taken together, these details

⁴²On the development of this principle in classical rhetoric and literary criticism, see J. F. D'Alton, *Roman Literary Theory and Criticism* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1931), 130–134; J. V. Cronjé, "The Principle of Concealment (τὸ λαθεῖν) in Greek Literary Theory," *Acta Classica* 36 (1993): 55–64.

⁴³*Rhetoric* 3.2.5 1404b24–26. This is a normative and unrefined conception of "ordinary conversation." Though fourth-century views might differ on what was ordinary (see n. 45 below), only Aristotle provides more than a hint of what he thinks it is. But it is clear that Isocrates, Alcidas, and Aristotle agree (essentially) on what was not ordinary. For another perspective, see Dover, *Evolution*, cited in n. 11 above, esp. pp. 61–65.

⁴⁴*Kleptein*: 3.2.5 1404b24; see also 3.2.10 1405a28; 3.7.10 1408b5. *Lanthanein*: 3.2.4 1404b18; 3.2.6 1404b36; 3.7.10 1408b8; 3.8.5 1409a9.

⁴⁵3.2.6 1404b34–35; 3.2.8 1405a8–9. Aristotle's endorsement of metaphor in prose conflicts with Isocrates' stricture against metaphor at *Evagoras* 9–10. But this may be related to the fact that Aristotle believes that "everyone converses with metaphors" (3.2.6 1404b34–35), while Isocrates does not seem to recognize their presence in common speech. See Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor," cited in n. 18 above, p. 526.

threaten to throw the whole distinction between poetic and appropriate prose styles into confusion.

Alcidamas' case is the most straightforward. For all his criticism of speeches written in a poetic manner, Alcidamas concedes a small place to this style in the practice of *epideixis* or display oratory. This qualification surfaces only at the end of the discourse (*On the Sophists* 29 f.) when Alcidamas turns from the virtues of extempore speech to address the charge of hypocrisy for having presented a written work himself. He acknowledges that he does not always speak extemporaneously, but uses writing "to prepare display pieces (*epideixeis*) for delivery before large audiences" (31). The reasons he gives for using writing on such occasions testify to the fact that display oratory was typically written, that it was typically written in a poetic style, and that audiences had come to expect this style in *epidexeis*. Alcidamas says that he urges close acquaintances (students?) to test his skill in extempore speech by having him improvise an *epideixis* "opportunistically and gracefully on any proposed topic" (31).⁴⁶ He admits, however, that he finds it advantageous to turn to writing when he faces audiences unfamiliar with him, "for they are accustomed to hearing written speeches from others, and if they heard me speak extemporaneously, they might perhaps have a lower opinion of me than I deserve" (31).

In earlier sections of *On the Sophists* Alcidamas had acknowledged the stylistic deficiency of extempore speech when compared to carefully written works. At 14, for example, Alcidamas describes the difficulties faced by the orator speaking from a prepared text when he is compelled to deviate from his script. When the speaker is forced to intermingle extemporaneous remarks with written material, the result is a rough and uneven style. The improvised sections, he says, will appear "flat and worthless (*tapeina kai phaula*) when compared to the precision (*akribeia*) of the rest."⁴⁷ Although this is solely a stylistic judgment—nowhere does Alcidamas suggest that

⁴⁶ Alcidamas' reputed teacher, Gorgias, was noted for being able to speak extempore on any topic; see Plato, *Gorgias* 447c, 449b-c; Philostratus, *Lives of Sophists* 1.9.11; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.17.11 1418a32; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 2.21.21, 12.21.11.

⁴⁷ *On the Sophists* 14; cf. also 16, 20–21. Compare Aristotle's manner of characterizing the unadorned language of everyday speech as *tapeina*—"flat" or "low"—at *Rhetoric* 3.2.1–2 1404b3–6 and *Poetics* 22 1458a18–19, 32, and note the similar language used by Isocrates to describe an ineffective reading or recitation of a written speech at *To Philip* 26: "[W]hen someone reads it out unpersuasively and without investing it with character, but rather as one would recite statistics—in these circumstances it is natural, I think, that [the speech] should seem trivial (*phaulos*) to its hearers."

the precision and poetic quality of written speeches will do anything but detract from the speech's persuasiveness in agonistic contexts of practical oratory—Alcidamas does allow that audiences have higher expectations of the style of *epideixeis* than could easily be achieved in improvisation and, thus, he leaves an opening for a poetic sort of prose on the basis of conventional differences between oratorical genres.⁴⁸

By comparison, Isocrates' case is more complicated and in certain respects quite puzzling. The nature of the problem can be gathered from the well-known description of his own discourses found in the *Antidosis*. Isocrates observes that there are some authors, like himself, who choose to write not for private legal disputes, but rather discourses,

of a Greek and political and panegyric nature—discourses which, as everyone will agree, are more akin to works composed in rhythm and set to music (ὁμοιοτέρους εἶναι τοῖς μετὰ μουσικῆς καὶ ῥυθμῶν πεποιημένοις) than those spoken in court. For they set forth facts in a style more poetic and more ornate (τῇ λέξει ποιητικωτέρα καὶ ποιικιλωτέρα); they employ thoughts which are more lofty and more original, and, besides, they use throughout figures in greater number and of more striking character (ταῖς ἄλλαις ἰδέαις ἐπιφανεστέραις καὶ πλείοσιν ὅλον τὸν λόγον διοκοῦσιν). All men take as much pleasure in listening to this kind discourse as in listening to poetry, and many desire to take lessons in it, believing that those who excel in this field are much wiser and better and of more use than men who speak well in court. (*Antidosis* 46–47; translation adapted from Norlin)

The passage reiterates the principle of stylistic propriety, the idea that lofty thoughts or content should be matched by a correspondingly fine style. The problem is how to reconcile this description of his own style with Isocrates' strict demarcation of prose from poetry in the passage of the *Evagoras* discussed above.⁴⁹ The fact is that Isocrates' allusions to his own style frequently emphasize its affinity with poetry, and in many cases suggest patent contradiction

⁴⁸On Alcidamas' view of epideictic, see J. A. E. Bons, "Alcidamas' *On the Sophists* and Epideictic Rhetoric," in A. P. Orbán and M. G. M. van der Poel eds., *Ad Litteras: Latin Studies in Honour of H. H. Brouwers* (Nijmegen: Nijmegen University Press, 2001), 97–105.

⁴⁹On the striking verbal and conceptual parallels between *Antidosis* 46–47 and *Evagoras* 8–11, see Terry Papillon, "Isocrates and the Greek Poetic Tradition," *Scholia* n.s. 7 (1998): 41–61 (p. 46). In *Evagoras*, though, the idea is that only poetry treats subjects lofty enough to deserve all the stylistic ornaments of exotic diction, meter, and so forth.

with the strictures laid down in *Evagoras*. For example, whereas the *Evagoras* passage left prose bereft of the "meters," "rhythms," and "harmonies" that give poetry its sweetness, this passage from *Antidosis* describes his discourses as "more akin to works composed in rhythm and set to music than those spoken in court," and calls his style "more poetic and more ornate" than that employed in the courts. Elsewhere too Isocrates prefers prose that is "musical" and states that he has sought to produce fine rhythms (*euruthmiai*) in his discourses.⁵⁰

The best explanation of Isocrates' seemingly contradictory statements regarding rhythm seems to be that the "rhythms" (*rhuthmoi*, *euruthmiai*) in *Evagoras* 10 must refer exclusively to poetic rhythms, that is, to those rhythmic units associated with specific and recognizable verse forms, without implying that prose cannot have rhythms of its own.⁵¹ But even if that is so, it does not account for Isocrates' more general claim that he has sought, and achieved, a "more poetic" style, where *Evagoras* would lead us to believe that such an effort would be misplaced and inappropriate.

To explain the difficulties raised by Isocrates' apparent turnabout Terry Papillon has urged a more sensitive appreciation of the context of Isocrates' remarks in the *Evagoras*. That work, as Isocrates repeatedly says, is of a novel sort; Isocrates claims that his is the first attempt to compose a prose discourse in praise of a contemporary. Accordingly, Papillon asks us to understand "Isocrates' complaint about the advantages accorded to the poet" in *Evagoras* as "indicative . . . not of a lack of poetic prose, but of the difficulty of bringing such a style into prose."⁵² Isocrates' strictures on prose style in *Evagoras* are thus interpreted as a strategic exaggeration undertaken to challenge the poets for literary preeminence:

⁵⁰μοῦσικῶς: *Against the Sophists* 16; *Letter to the Children of Jason* 6. εὐρυθμῶς, εὐρυθμία: *Against the Sophists* 16; *To Philip* 27 (the latter referring specifically to his earlier speeches). Kenneth Dover (*Evolution*, cited in n. 11 above, pp. 172–173) observes that the earliest references to prose rhythm in Greek occur in the passage from *To Philip* and in Alcidas' *On the Sophists* 16, but εὐρυθμία at *Against the Sophists* 16 may be the earliest of the lot.

⁵¹So Dover, *Evolution*, cited in n. 11 above, p. 183 n. 62; see also O'Sullivan, *Alcidas*, cited in n. 7 above, pp. 51–52. A fragment reputed to come from an Isocratean handbook contains the instruction that "prose should not be mere prose, or else it will be dry; but it must not be metrical, for then artifice is manifest; it must rather be compounded of all sorts of rhythms"; see Radermacher, *Artium scriptores*, cited in n. 28 above, B.24.22, with O'Sullivan, *Alcidas*, 52 n. 166.

⁵²Papillon, "Isocrates," 48; emphases in original.

Nevertheless, although poetry has advantages so great, we must not shrink from the task, but must make the effort and see if it will be possible in prose to eulogize good men in no worse fashion than their encomiasts do who employ song and verse. (*Evagoras* 11)

Isocrates imagines his *Evagoras* as constituting evidence that it is indeed “possible in prose to eulogize good men in no worse fashion than their encomiasts do who employ song and verse.” In that work he presents an exaggeratedly austere view of prose style because he wants to convince his audience that he, as a writer of prose, operates at a disadvantage and thus deserves special credit for having exceeded the poets.⁵³

A similar approach is warranted for Isocrates’ remarks on diction as well. In *Evagoras*, Isocrates wanted to banish from prose all the “foreign words, neologisms, and metaphors” used by poets to “embroider their poetry”; and he claimed that prose writers were allowed to employ only those sorts of words used in everyday speech. Yet Isocrates does employ metaphors in his own prose. Even if the critics of later antiquity are correct in their judgment that Isocrates tends to be restrained, even timid, in his use of such tropes,⁵⁴ we can find them easily in any of his discourses (including the *Evagoras*).⁵⁵ But we need look no further than book 3 of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, in which Isocrates’ works are quoted approvingly for examples of metaphor.⁵⁶ With metaphor, then, as with rhythm, Isocrates does not practice what he appears to preach at *Evagoras* 9–10.

What emerges from Isocrates’ discourses is a reversal of Alcidas’ criticism of the characteristic style of written speeches. Alcidas chastised written speeches for being too much like poetry, referring to the qualities of *akribeia* and *rhuthmos*. Turning Alcidas’ criticism around, Isocrates approved of and sought to achieve the very qualities dismissed by his rival, and even considered a cer-

⁵³On Isocrates’ relationship to the poetic tradition and his claims to rival the poets, see Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), vol. 3, 62; Papillon, “Isocrates”; North, “Use of Poetry,” cited in n. 9 above, pp. 4–5; Ford, *Origins of Criticism*, cited in n. 6 above, pp. 235–240.

⁵⁴Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Demosthenes* 18; Hermogenes, *On Types of Style* 12.298–299.

⁵⁵See Kirby, “Aristotle on Metaphor,” cited in n. 18 above, pp. 525–526 for examples of metaphors from *On the Peace*, *Areopagiticus*, and *Evagoras*.

⁵⁶*Rhetoric* 3.10.7 1411a30–31 = *To Philip* 12, “those running together (τοὺς συνηχόντας) in festivals”; *Rhetoric* 3.10.7 1411b11 = *Panegyricus* 151, “in every way practicing (μελετῶντες) lowly thinking.”

tain amount of poetic coloring desirable in prose.⁵⁷ In this respect, Isocrates is happy to accept Alcidamas' criticism—but not without giving some criticism of his own in return. In his late essay, *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates reiterates the distinction of *Antidosis* 46–47 between his own discourses and those written for the courts, stating that his *logoi* contain “many *enthumêmata*, and not a few *antitheses* and *parisôses* and the other devices (*ideai*) that shine in orations and induce the audience to approve and applaud.”⁵⁸ In contrast, he says, the speeches presented by pleaders in the lawcourts are written to “give the impression of having been composed in a simple manner and . . . lack all the refinements of style.” Criticism of forensic pleading—the focus of Alcidamas' teaching—is one constant in Isocrates' works, and these particular passages level a pointed critique at the style of such discourses which, he sneers, “lack all the refinements” of his own “more poetic” style.⁵⁹

When we return to the *Rhetoric* to size up the details of Aristotle's strictures on “poetic” prose, we discover a situation that again flirts with inconsistency. As noted earlier, Aristotle is perfectly direct in asserting that the “style of prose is not the style of poetry.” Moreover, the conception of stylistic excellence in prose following from this distinction is clear in the abstract: “the virtue of rhetorical *logos*” is achieved when the style is clear and also slightly “strange,” but not so elevated so as to be confused with verse (*Rhetoric* 3.2.6 1404b36–37). The message tends to blur, however, when Aristotle comes to the analysis and illustration of specific devices and techniques.

In the discussion of prose rhythm at *Rhetoric* 3.8, Aristotle's invocation of the contrast with poetry involves no contradiction, but does require some delicate discriminations. Aristotle begins by calling unrhythmical speech deficient because it is *apeiron*, “limitless.” All things are given limits by number (*arithmos*) and in the form of expression (*schêma tês lexeôs*) this number is rhythm. Because both knowledge and pleasure require “limits,” prose that

⁵⁷Isocrates claims for himself both the *akribeia* and the rhythm Alcidamas says are characteristic of “poetic” written speeches. On Isocrates' references to his use of rhythm, see n. 50 above; for comments on his *akribeia* (“precision”), see *Panegyricus* 11, *Evagoras* 73, *To Philip* 4, 155.

⁵⁸*Panathenaicus* 2; translation adapted from Kirby.

⁵⁹*Panathenaicus* 2. See also *Panegyricus* 11. It is hard to agree with Ford's assertion that Isocrates mounts “a significant defense of prose literature, as artistic speech that makes no claims to the charm of poetry but is yet worth writing down and preserving . . .” (*Origins of Criticism*, cited in n. 6 above, p. 235; emphasis added).

lacks rhythm is "unpleasant and unknowable" (3.8.2 1408b27–30).⁶⁰ Rhythm provides the desired limits, then, but it can be carried to excess. In this case, the excess is meter, that is, the regular recurrence of rhythmic units, especially recognizably poetic ones. This makes the prose "unpersuasive" because it appears artificial (3.8.1 1408b22–23). The solution—again, a mean—consists in rhythm, which to avoid appearing artificial must not be too exact: "speech should have rhythm," he says, "but not meter; for the latter will be a poem" (3.8.3 1408b30–31).⁶¹ To determine the specific type of rhythm that best suits oratorical prose, Aristotle falls back on the criterion of controlled deviation from the norm of common speech. He notes that the "heroic" (dactylic) measure is solemn, but too far removed from ordinary speech (3.8.3 1408b32–33); the trochaic is too closely associated with comic drama; the iambic is the rhythm of normal conversation and thus deficient because, he says, a speech "should be dignified and moving" (3.8.4 1408b33–36).⁶² Aristotle thus settles on the paean, which is sufficiently strange, but which is not a standard poetic rhythm and so will not strike the audience as contrived (3.8.5 1409a8–9).

Aristotle's recommendations on the prosody of prose shift uneasily between the lines that separate formal verse from rhythmically haphazard, and thus banal, "natural" speech. But not all sections of *Rhetoric* 3.2–12 are even this tidy. One chapter presents a striking illustration of the sort of breakdown to which Aristotle's prohibition on so-called poetic devices in prose is liable. This is *Rhetoric* 3.6, which treats *onkos*, stylistic "swelling" or "weightiness." Kennedy calls attention to the prescriptive tone of the chapter.⁶³ Indeed, it reads like a series of recipes for amplification and diminution, but unlike other sections of 3.2–12 Aristotle here provides little guidance as to the appropriate use of the techniques he enumerates. One precept looks familiar: "make something clear by metaphor and epithets, while guarding against the poetic" (*Rhetoric* 3.6.3 1407b31–32). This (by now expected) injunction to avoid poetic diction is immediately undercut, however, by the advice that follows: "and make the sin-

⁶⁰Aristotle may be drawing on Pythagorean doctrine; see E. M. Cope, *The "Rhetoric" of Aristotle, with a Commentary*, J. E. Sandys ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1877), vol. 3, 84–85.

⁶¹As Hendrickson observed ("Peripatetic Mean of Style," cited in n. 34 above, pp. 130–132), the account of prose rhythm furnishes an especially vivid illustration of Aristotle's application of the principle of the mean to the subject of style.

⁶²For this view of the iambic rhythm, see also *Poetics* 4 1449a23–27.

⁶³Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric*, cited in n. 12 above, p. 233.

gular plural, as the poets do: though there is a single harbor, they say 'to Achaean harbors' . . . " (3.6.3 1407b32–34). Other decidedly poetic techniques for achieving *onkos* are mentioned in 3.6 without any cautions regarding their use in prose. Indeed, the chapter concludes with the following advice: "What it is not can be said of things good and bad, whichever is useful. This is the source of words the poets introduce such as 'stringless' or 'lyreless' music, for they apply privatives" (3.6.7 1408a4–7).

Rhetoric 3.6 shows well the slipperiness of Aristotle's prose-poetry distinction in the area of diction, but other instances abound. Aristotle devotes an entire chapter, *Rhetoric* 3.3, to analysis of inappropriate prose diction. Treating them under the general heading of "frigidities" (*psuchra*), he criticizes compound words (especially newly coined ones), foreign words, long, crowded, or "untimely" (*akaira*) epithets, and certain sorts of metaphor for being inappropriate in prose primarily on account of their poetic cast.⁶⁴ Aristotle's inventory of prohibited *psuchra* looks very like the list of "cosmetic" terms Isocrates said in the *Evagoras* were allowed only to poets,⁶⁵ and yet, as was the case with Isocrates, Aristotle proves to be less than strict in applying the precept. In a later chapter (3.7), Aristotle identifies compound words, numerous epithets, and "especially unfamiliar words (*xena*)" as suited to a speaker in the grip of emotion, for, he says, "it is excusable that an angry person calls a wrong 'heaven-high' or 'monstrous'" (*Rhetoric* 3.7.11 1408b10–13).⁶⁶ Audiences who have been moved by the speaker's emotion, as reflected in his style, will fail to notice the transgression: "Those who are impassioned mouth such utterances, and audiences clearly accept them because they are in a similar mood. That is why [this emotional style] is suited to poetry, too, for poetry is inspired." Aristotle observes that the non-serious use of this emotional and poetic style in prose can be effective for mockery, citing Gorgias and Plato's *Phaedrus* as examples.⁶⁷ More

⁶⁴*Rhetoric* 3.3.1 1406a6; 3.3.3 1406a12–14, 31–32.

⁶⁵O'Sullivan (*Alcidamas*, cited in n. 7 above, p. 51) has suggested that Aristotle's discussion of frigidities at *Rhetoric* 3.3 is borrowed from Isocrates' list of poetic word types at *Evagoras* 9–10; cf. Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor," cited in n. 18 above, pp. 524–525.

⁶⁶On the "poetical" character of the terms οὐρανόμεγας and πελώριον, see Cope, *The "Rhetoric" of Aristotle*, cited in n. 60 above, ad loc. (vol. 3, 80). The ξένα ("strange" words) in *Rhetoric* 3.7 should be considered equivalent to the γλωτται ("foreign" words) listed among the frigidities in *Rhetoric* 3.3.

⁶⁷3.7.11 1408b17–20. The commendation of Gorgias here is exceptional, since the sophist's style is roundly criticized elsewhere in *Rhetoric* 3. Plato's *Phaedrus* contains

significant, though, is Aristotle's example of the earnest application of effectively passionate language—Isocrates, the same man who in the *Evagoras* claimed to be barred from drawing from the stylistic well of poetry.⁶⁸

Aristotle's allowance of poetical words to the emotional speaker has struck some commentators as contradicting the rules for diction laid down in *Rhetoric* 3.3.⁶⁹ However, there is really no contradiction unless one assumes that the strictures against the frigid word-types in *Rhetoric* 3.3 are absolute. But this cannot be the case, because metaphors—more precisely, inappropriate metaphors—are classed among the frigidities (at 3.3.4), yet metaphors are in general highly commended elsewhere throughout *Rhetoric* 3.2–12. Further, Aristotle does grant in 3.3 that epithets can be employed in moderation, and it is possible that he means this allowance to apply to compound and foreign words as well (*Rhetoric* 3.3.3 1406a16–17). And in 3.2 he admits that compound words and *glôttai* can be used “rarely and in a limited number of situations” (3.2.5 1404b28–31).

Clearly, then, Aristotle will accept word types he considers poetic—types not found in ordinary conversation—though evidently he does so somewhat reluctantly (or perhaps, at *Rhetoric* 3.7.11 1408b10 ff., ironically). *Kuria* and metaphors are favored precisely because these are words “everybody uses” (3.2.6 1404b33–35), and because their combination provides a sufficient mixture of the familiar (through *kuria* or *oikeia onomata*), the clear (from *kuria* and metaphor), and the “strange” (metaphor).⁷⁰ Yet Aristotle also recog-

passages referring to poetic qualities of certain samples of oratory (257a, with Dover, *Evolution*, cited in n. 11 above, ch. 6; cf. 238d, 241e); as such, the dialogue constitutes another early example of the standard distinction between the styles of poetry and oratorical prose.

⁶⁸*Rhetoric* 3.7.11 1408b13–16: “And [the use of poetic terms will be acceptable] when a speaker holds the audience in his control and causes them to be stirred either by praise or blame or hate or love, as Isocrates does at the end of the *Panegyricus*: ‘[How great the] fame and name . . .’ and [earlier] ‘who endured . . . [to see the city made desolate].’”

⁶⁹Werhli, “Der Erhabene und der schlichte Stil,” cited in n. 7 above, p. 27; O’Sullivan, *Alcidamas*, cited in n. 7 above, p. 59; Neil O’Sullivan, “Written and Spoken in the First Sophistic,” in Ian Worthington ed., *Voice into Text: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 115–127 (p. 127 n. 35).

⁷⁰At *Poetics* 22 Aristotle states that because iambic verse is very close to ordinary speech, it should use only those words one would use in prose, namely: κύρια, metaphors, and κόσμοι (*Poetics* 22 1459a11–14). This last category, *kosmoi* or “ornamental” words, though clearly involving “divergence from usual or standard

nizes that it is sometimes efficacious to deviate from this standard, provided that propriety is observed in the use of poetic vocabulary.

This is a snapshot of Aristotle's position on the subject of prose diction, but a fuller picture of his views on the employment of poetic devices in prose requires one further consideration: an appraisal of his references in the *Rhetoric* to orators and works of prose as well as to poets and poems. It is well known that Aristotle does not generate his own examples of the devices he describes and that he selects *exempla* and illustrative quotations from poetry.⁷¹ Indeed, excepting Isocrates, in the *Rhetoric* he quotes no prose author—not even Plato—with any regularity. Again excepting Isocrates, in the chapters of book three devoted to *lexis*, citations of oratorical or other prose works are concentrated in just a few sections,⁷² the most substantial of which, 3.3, is given entirely to analysis of a stylistic defect, poetic terms that result in “frigid” prose. There, Aristotle singles out Gorgias, Lycophron, and Alcidamas as the chief transgressors, quoting no other authors. The mention of Gorgias in this context is unsurprising and fills out Aristotle's earlier criticism of the sophist's “poetic style.” Lycophron and Alcidamas are both thought to have been students or associates of Gorgias and they do show stylistic affinities with him. But of the group, only Alcidamas is quoted as an example of all four sources of frigidity—compound words, rare words, untimely epithets, and far-fetched metaphors. In respect to diction, then, Aristotle treats Alcidamas as the most inappropriately poetic of all, exceeding even Gorgias, who is quoted for examples of only the first and fourth types of *psuchra*.⁷³

terms” is nowhere defined by Aristotle; see *Poetics* 21 1457b2, 22 1458a33, and Dover, *Evolution*, cited in n. 11 above, p. 96 with n. 2.

⁷¹On Aristotle's citation practice and his habit of drawing *exempla* from poetry, see J. C. Trevett, “Aristotle's Knowledge of Athenian Oratory,” *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996): 371–380 (pp. 375–376); and North, “Use of Poetry,” cited in n. 9 above, pp. 6–7. W. S. Hinman, “Literary Quotation and Allusion in the *Rhetoric*, *Poetics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle” (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1935) gives a thorough inventory and some discussion of all quotations, misquotations, allusions, and possible allusions in the *Rhetoric*.

⁷²*Rhetoric* 3.3, 3.4.3, and 3.10.7; see Richard Graff, “Reading and the ‘Written Style’ in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31 (2001): 19–44 (pp. 34–35).

⁷³In respect to diction, Alcidamas was considered Gorgias' true stylistic heir by later critics; see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Isaews* 19; Demetrius, *On Style* 116. Aristotle's assessment is also confirmed in O'Sullivan's analysis of Alcidamas' language (O'Sullivan, *Alcidamas*, cited in n. 7 above, pp. 32–40). As O'Sullivan acknowledges (p. 31), his findings are in accord with Vahlen's study which established the authenticity of *On the Sophists* largely on the basis of comparison of its diction with the

Here we appear to be witnessing Aristotle's intrusion into the debate between Alcidas and Isocrates. Earlier I noted that Isocrates, who in *Evagoras* claimed to be at a disadvantage when compared to the poets, was himself open to the charge of being overly poetic on the stylistic criteria laid down by Alcidas, and further, that he accepted parts of this critique, expressing pride in having challenged the poets by developing a prose style that was comparatively "more poetic and ornate" than the discourses composed for the courts. Judging from the citations in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle plainly sides with Isocrates: In stark contrast to the treatment of Gorgias and Alcidas, in *Rhetoric* 3.2–12 Aristotle cites Isocrates frequently and always in an approving manner.⁷⁴ In the one instance where Aristotle suggests that Isocrates' style is "poetic" (3.7.11 1408b13–16), he says it is appropriately so.

Aristotle's contribution to the debate has the effect of further confusing distinctions that at first appeared firm. His handling of poetry and poets in *Rhetoric* 3.2–12 compounds the difficulty. Recall that in the chapter on *onkos* (3.6) Aristotle had commended several explicitly poetic techniques, including the production of novel expressions through the attachment of a privative alpha to a noun: "What it is not can be said of things good and bad, whichever is useful. This is the source of words the poets introduce such as stringless (*ἄχορδον*) or lyreless (*ἄλυρον*) music, for they apply privatives" (3.6.7 1408a4–7). This advice runs counter to the precept of *Rhetoric* 3.3 that opposes the use of neologistic compounds precisely because they are poetic. And yet this instance proves to be entirely consistent with Aristotle's more general tendency to look first to the poets in describing features of *lexis*. In fact, he refers to poetry to exemplify virtually all the devices he is commending for prose, a procedure that often produces curious results. In the division of "running" and "turned-down" (periodic) styles that introduces his analysis of the period, Aristotle likens these modes of prose composition to the preludes in dithyrambs and the antistrophes "of the ancient poets," respectively (3.9.1 1409a24–27).⁷⁵ Poets and dramatic actors, but no prose authors, are identified as exemplars of the "agonistic" and "written"

features of Alcidas' style identified by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* 3.3; J. Vahlen, "Der Rhetor Alkidamas," *Sitzungsberichte der Wissenschaften in Wien* 43 (1863): 491–528.

⁷⁴See *Rhetoric* 3.7.11 1408b15–16; 3.9.7 1409b33–1410a16; 3.10.5 1410b29–30; 3.10.7 1411a30–31, 1411b11; 3.11.2 1411b28–29; 3.11.7 1412b5–10, with Hinman, "Literary Quotation," 47–53, 88–89, and Graff, "Reading and the 'Written' Style," 34 and n. 31.

⁷⁵Later in 3.9, Aristotle illustrates his idea that a period should encompass a complete thought by quoting a line from Euripides in which the sense is left

styles of oratory analyzed in 3.12.⁷⁶ Another poet, Homer, provides Aristotle's only verifiable example of *paromoiôsis* and his only examples of hyperbole and asyndeton.⁷⁷ Similarly, while he notes that Thrasymachus had initiated the use of the paeon—Aristotle's preferred rhythm for rhetorical prose owing to its weak link to formal verse—Aristotle does not actually quote the sophist-orator or some other prose author, but illustrates the rhythm with lyric poetry.⁷⁸ All told, a curious approach indeed to the first serious analysis of the *lexis* of prose, which Aristotle had initially proclaimed was to hold poeticisms at arm's length.

Similarly peculiar are Aristotle's remarks on the style of specific poets and of poetry more generally. Especially relevant in this regard are two passages from early in *Rhetoric* 3 in which Aristotle announces that prose should avoid the exotic diction of poetry and of early prose writers like Gorgias. First, Aristotle claims that even certain poets have stopped using the high-flown diction and exotic meters "with which they had at first ornamented their diction." "As a result," he says, "it is absurd [for prose writers] to imitate those [poets] who themselves no longer use that style of speech" (*Rhetoric* 3.1.9 1404a25–36). Next, after asserting that the *lexis* of prose should be "hidden" or "stolen away" from the audience, Aristotle observes that such a "theft is well done if one composes by choosing words from ordinary

incomplete until the following line (3.9.4 1409b8–12, with Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric*, cited in n. 12 above, p. 240 n. 99); cf. also *Rhetoric* 3.9.6 1409b26–30.

⁷⁶For the agonistic style, Aristotle refers to the dramatist Anaxandrides (3.12.3 1413b25–27); for the written style, to the playwright Chaeremon and the lyric poet Licymnius (3.12.2 1413b13–14); see Graff, "Reading and the 'Written' Style," 35–36.

⁷⁷*Paromoiôsis*: *Rhetoric* 3.9.9 1410a29–30 = *Iliad* 9.526; the sources for the other examples Aristotle cites are unknown. Hyperbole: 3.11.15 1413a31–34 = *Iliad* 9.385, 388–389. This quotation, which Kassel considers a late addition by Aristotle, is followed in the manuscripts by the comment that "The Attic orators especially use this [i.e., hyperbole]," which may be interpolation; see Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric*, 253 nn. 158–159. Asyndeton: 3.12.4 1414a2–3 = *Iliad* 2.671–673. Homer also serves as Aristotle's chief exemplar of stylistic *energeia*; see the Homeric examples quoted at *Rhetoric* 3.11.2–4 1411b31–1412a9.

⁷⁸*Rhetoric* 3.8.4 1409a1–3; 3.8.5–6 1409a9–20. With regard to the paeon, Kennedy notes (*Aristotle On Rhetoric*, 238 n. 90) that the cretic rhythm, though ignored by Aristotle, could be defended by the same criteria and would more accurately reflect the tendencies of fourth-century prose. On Aristotle's preference for the paeon, see William W. Fortenbaugh "On the Composition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: Arguing the Issue, Emotional Appeal, Persuasion through Character, and Characters Tied to Age and Fortune," in Christian Mueller-Goldingen and Kurt Sier eds., *AHNAIKA: Festschrift Carl Werner Müller* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde) (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1996), 165–188 (pp. 172–173).

language." But when he identifies an exemplar to follow on this path, it is not a prose author (say, Lysias), but Euripides—that is, a poet—who is named as "the first to show the way" to this "ordinary" manner of composing (3.2.5 1404b24–26).⁷⁹ What are we to make of this final loosening of the contrast between poetry and prose?

We have seen that in *Rhetoric* 3 Aristotle calls glosses, new coinages, and other non-standard word-types or otherwise unusual expressive forms, "poetic."⁸⁰ That he does this so casually suggests a simple conclusion, namely, that Aristotle, like Alcidas and Isocrates, has a clear and definite notion of what is distinctive about the language of poetry and a view of what is permissible in poetry but not in prose. But in fact the situation is more complicated. Though certain of these complications might be attributable to the problematic status of the text of *Rhetoric* 3 or even to imprecision or inconsistency in Aristotle's terminology or thinking on the issue,⁸¹ a more straightforward explanation can be produced by recognizing that Aristotle does not have a single or simple view of poetic style. That is, Aristotle recognizes and to some degree honors—as Isocrates and Alcidas, evidently, do not⁸²—stylistic variations between types of poetry as well as differences between individual poets.

⁷⁹Despite his lukewarm view of Euripides in other respects, Aristotle clearly approves of his style (J. F. Sullivan, "Aristotle's Estimate of Euripides in His *Rhetoric*," *Classical Bulletin* 10 (1933): 70–71; E. E. Sikes, *The Greek View of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1931), 155). On the ancient critical tradition concerning Euripides' *eiôthua dialektos*, see Werhli, "Der Erhabene und der schlichte Stil," cited in n. 7 above, pp. 24–25; cf. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity*, cited in n. 7 above, pp. 132–133; O'Sullivan, *Alcidas*, cited in n. 7 above, pp. 9, 130–150, and *passim*.

⁸⁰The word-types called "poetic" at *Rhetoric* 3.2, 3.3, 3.6, and 3.7 and elsewhere in *Rhetoric* 3 can all be placed in the class of *xena* or "alien" terms—opposed to *kuria*—that are listed and analyzed at *Poetics* 21–22. To that list we might add the poetic *epitheta* criticized as frigid in *Rhetoric* 3.3. On similes (*eikones*), absent from *Poetics*, but treated in *Rhetoric* 3.4 as a class of metaphor at especially suited for poetry, see Marsh M. McCall, *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 29–53.

⁸¹On the composition of *Rhetoric* 3 and its relationship to books 1 and 2, see Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric*, cited in n. 12 above, pp. 302–305; Kennedy, *Art of Persuasion*, cited in n. 13 above, pp. 103–109. On some of the special difficulties presented by the book, see E. M. Cope, *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric* (London and Cambridge: MacMillan, 1867), 132–133; McCall, *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile*, 29–30.

⁸²This is true at least as concerns the extant texts in which the issue of style is at issue; as we have seen, in these cases the context of Isocrates' and Alcidas' remarks is obviously polemical and the judgments passed on poetry and its style quite jejune. Outside of this context, though, it is fairly certain that both men appreciated differences, including stylistic ones, between poets or poetic genres. Alcidas would

Indeed, in the *Poetics* Aristotle draws some very plain distinctions between both the rhythms and meters of different sorts of poetry and the different registers of diction suited to each. Comments in *Rhetoric* 3 are consistent with and supplement the sketchy observations in *Poetics*. All told, epic and tragedy enjoy the fullest treatment. The heroic meter of epic, dactylic hexameter, is the "most stately and weightiest" (*stasimôtaton kai onkôdestaton*) of verse-forms. Epic also permits the greatest latitude in terms of diction: *glôttai* or "loan words" are especially useful to epic poets because they are "dignified and self-assured" (*semnon kai authades*).⁸³ Epic's stately rhythm is also highly receptive to metaphors, but it readily admits all sorts of exotic word-types.⁸⁴ Iambic trimeter, the meter of tragic dialogue in its developed form, is more dignified than the trochaic tetrameter used previously, but it is not so exalted as the epic hexameter. Iambs are appropriate for dramatic dialogue because they most closely resemble the rhythm of normal speech (*lektikon*).⁸⁵ On the same reasoning, Aristotle commends the tragedians' abandonment of "words that are not conversational, with which they had at first ornamented their diction";⁸⁶ he specifies metaphors as especially suited to iambic verse which, "because of its very close relation to ordinary speech" best uses those words that "one would also use in prose (*logoi*)—namely, standard terms, metaphors, and ornaments" (*Poetics* 22 1459a10–14). Though Aristotle describes stylistic registers, in rhythm as well as diction, with reference to their proximity to "everyday" speech (*idiôtikon*, *lektikon*, etc.), the underlying conception of ordinariness remains ill defined. Nevertheless, that conception anchors Aristotle's comparison of poetic genres as well. On the one hand, epic's rhythm is solemn (*semnos*), but not conversational (*Rhetoric* 3.8.4 1408b32–33); people speak hexameters only rarely in conversation and "when diverging from the colloquial register" (*Poetics* 4 1449a26–27). The iambic trimeter of tragedy, on the other hand, "more than any other meter, has the rhythm of speech [and] an indication of this is that we speak [unintentionally] many iambs in conversation with one another."⁸⁷

certainly have considered such matters in the "Contest between Homer and Hesiod" thought to have been included in his *Mouseion* (on which, see O'Sullivan, *Alcidas*, cited in n. 7 above, ch. 3). For a passage suggesting Isocrates' cognizance of generic distinctions in poetry, see *Antidosis* 45–46.

⁸³ *Poetics* 24 1459b33–34; *Rhetoric* 3.3.3 1406b2–3.

⁸⁴ *Poetics* 24 1459b34–35, 22 1459a9–11; cf. *Rhetoric* 3.1.9 1404a33–35.

⁸⁵ *Poetics* 4 1449a20–24; cf. *Rhetoric* 3.1.9 1404a30–32.

⁸⁶ *Rhetoric* 3.1.9 1404a33–34; cf. 3.2.5 1404b24–26.

⁸⁷ *Poetics* 4 1449a23–26; cf. *Rhetoric* 3.1.9 1404a30–33; 3.8.4 1408b33–35.

What emerges is a range of poetic styles that parallels but also compromises the broader stylistic continuum which spanned from the zero-degree of standard speech (at the low end) to poetry at the elevated extreme. Compiling Aristotle's remarks on both the meters and diction of various poetic genres, tragedy is found to occupy a comparatively low position as it approximates the style of ordinary spoken language, whereas epic, at the top, has freedom to employ all manner of verbal resources. Aristotle provides fewer details on the style of genres other than tragedy and epic, but his incidental remarks make them harder to place on this spectrum. Dithyramb, with its penchant for compound words (*dipla*), should be placed toward the high end. Comedy, not tragedy, was the genre whose style all later critics would recognize as the closest to natural speech. But on Aristotle's account, it might be said to drop below that register. Comedy uses words disproportionate to its subject matter (high language for low subjects, banal words for grand themes) and its meter, the trochaic tetrameter, is a "tripping" rhythm that is insufficiently dignified for oratorical prose.⁸⁸ However these differences are calibrated, it remains the case that when Aristotle opposes appropriate prose style to a showy poetic style, he must usually have only certain poetic techniques in mind; when he urges the prose writer to avoid a generalized poetic style, one needs to decide *what kind* of poetic style.

To draw from both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, as I have been doing here, is appropriate and necessary for a full reconstruction of Aristotle's views on *lexis*. The *Rhetoric* contains a number of references to the *Poetics*, with most of them pointing to that work's discussions of style and metaphor.⁸⁹ In the *Poetics* Aristotle refers to both prose and verse in his definition of style (*lexis*): "expression through choice of words—something which has the same meaning [*dunamis*] in verse

⁸⁸On the "tripping" rhythm of comedy, see *Rhetoric* 3.8.4 1408b36–1409a1; on the diction of comedy, *Rhetoric* 3.7.2 1408a11–15.

⁸⁹*Rhetoric* 3.1.10 1404a38–39; 3.2.2 1404b7–8; 3.2.5 1404b27–28; 3.2.7 1405a5–6. On the relation of the two texts, see Walter Burkert, "Aristoteles im Theater," *Museum Helveticum* 32 (1975): 67–72; Gerald F. Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, ed. Paul Burian (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 67–73; Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 325–330; William W. Fortenbaugh, "Eudemus' Work On Expression," in István Bodnár and William W. Fortenbaugh eds., *Eudemus of Rhodes* (RUSCH 11) (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 59–83 (pp. 77–78). On the theory of metaphor in particular, see Morpurgo-Tagliabue, *Linguistica e stilistica di Aristotele*, cited in n. 40 above, Paul Ricoeur, "Between Rhetoric and Poetics: Aristotle," in *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 9–43.

and in prose" (*Poetics* 6 1450b13–15). There is an even more powerful and explicit parallel in the two works' definitions of a stylistic ideal.

Poetics 1458a17: The virtue of style is to be clear without being flat. The clearest style is that which uses only current words, but at the same time it is flat.⁹⁰

Rhetoric 3.2.1 1404b1–8: I define the virtue of style as to be clear . . . and neither flat nor overdone, but appropriate. The poetic style is hardly flat, but it is not appropriate for speech. The use of nouns and verbs in currency makes for clarity; other kinds of words, as discussed in the *Poetics*, make the style ornamented rather than flat.⁹¹

The two passages differ only in that the second sets an upper limit on *lexis*—be not excessive!—whereas the first implies no such limit and says nothing about propriety. In this, the "virtue" of style stipulated in the *Poetics* comports with the common view that poets can take licenses which prose authors dare not. But later in *Poetics* 22, it becomes clear that poets are not completely free and that propriety is as important in poetry as it is in prose. Aristotle observes that the exclusive use of exotic terms results in barbarism and destroys clarity, and so poets need to exercise moderation to achieve a suitable blend of the unusual-alien and the common-clear. He also comments on "appropriate" versus "inappropriate" uses of metaphor, *glôttai*, and other *xena* (*Poetics* 22 1458a23–b15, 1459a1–4).

The definition of stylistic excellence in the *Poetics* is stated as though it should apply to *lexis* generally or, given the context, to the *lexis* of poetry in all its forms.⁹² Only later in chapter 22 does the subject of propriety in diction emerge and, with it, some reflections on the expectations attached to the different poetic genres (tragedy, epic, comedy). These reflections join with remarks on poetic rhythms and meters scattered elsewhere in the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* to indicate a range of different, but equally suitable poetic styles, with tragedy and epic occupying opposite ends of the spectrum. Aristotle observes, however, that in actual historical practice the range had not always

⁹⁰λέξεως δὲ ἀρετὴ σαφὴ καὶ μὴ ταπεινὴ εἶναι. σαφεστάτη μὲν οὖν ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκ τῶν κυρίων ὀνομάτων, ἀλλὰ ταπεινῆ.

⁹¹ὠρίσθω λέξεως ἀρετὴ σαφὴ εἶναι . . . καὶ μήτε ταπεινὴ μήτε ὑπὲρ τὸ ἀξίωμα, ἀλλὰ πρέπουσαν· ἡ γὰρ ποιητικὴ ἴσως οὐ ταπεινῆ, ἀλλ' οὐ πρέπουσα λόγῳ. τῶν δ' ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων σαφὴ μὲν ποιεῖ τὰ κύρια, μὴ ταπεινὴ δὲ ἀλλὰ κεκοσμημένην τᾶλλα ὀνόματα ὅσα εἴρηται ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς.

⁹²See Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 344; Stephen Halliwell, "Aristotle's Poetics," in George A. Kennedy ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 149–183 (p. 168).

been so broad, and that the gulf separating tragedy and epic, in respect to both their meters and their idioms, had only recently widened to its current dimensions. Though the form of epic was fixed at an early time, in Aristotle's account tragedy arose later and had recently undergone considerable changes, in what Aristotle describes as a maturing process culminating in the discovery of tragedy's "proper nature" (*Poetics* 4 1449a14–15, 1449a23–24). Among other developments, tragedy's style too evolved until it assumed its proper form: for spoken dialogue, the tragic poets ceased using the trochaic tetrameter in favor of the iambic trimeter and they traded their previously peculiar diction for a language that was more accessible. Aristotle views Euripidean drama as the culmination of this line of development—as he says in *Rhetoric* 3, Euripides was "the first to show the way."

Thus, to insist that the stylistic upper limit for prose described in *Rhetoric* 3 is "poetry" is to ignore the fact that in his references to the style of tragedy in both *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* Aristotle recognizes and endorses that genre's development towards a more colloquial or prosaic register. Stephen Halliwell makes the point well when he observes that Aristotle shows a "significant if paradoxical tendency ... to assimilate the style of poetry [i.e., tragic poetry] to prose ... [B]etween *tragedy* and rhetorical prose the stylistic differential seems to be almost obliterated by Aristotle's principle ... that the poetic genre imitates ordinary speech (or vocabulary) as far as possible."⁹³ The conclusion relevant to Aristotle's ideas on prose is that when Aristotle tells the prose author not to compose in a poetic style, he is cautioning against the use of features most characteristic of certain non-tragic verse forms, especially epic. Prose authors should reject the exoticism associated especially with epic and with the poetic style popularized by Gorgias; the tragedians have already done so.

Of course, this view rests on largely subjective distinctions. For example, it is certain that Euripides' language, though by all accounts less "foreign" than Aeschylus', could not be confused with that of the discourse spoken on the streets of fifth or fourth century Athens. But it is also difficult to be certain about what is "ordinary" in the style of philosophical, scientific, historical, or oratorical prose of the classical period. Meter constituted the one firm criterion by which to distinguish poetry, including tragedy, from prose. But even here there is a curious wrinkle relating to Aristotle's conception of tragic poetry vis-à-vis rhetorical prose. Tragedy has come to favor the

⁹³Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 347–348; emphasis in original.

iambic rhythm and it has done so because, as he says in the *Poetics*, the iamb is the “rhythm of speech” (*lektikon tôn metrôn*). Aristotle states the same thing in *Rhetoric* 3, but to opposite purpose. In recommending a rhythm for prose in *Rhetoric* 3.8, Aristotle discounts the iambic precisely because “everyone speaks in iambs”; prose, he says, “needs to be more dignified and moving” than that (*Rhetoric* 3.8.4 1408b33–36). His preferred rhythm for prose, the paeon, is recommended by virtue of its not having a close connection with any of the familiar poetic genres, but also because, *qua* rhythm, the paeon is in effect loftier than the one he approves for tragedy. Indeed Aristotle cautions against the strict and regular recurrence of any rhythmical unit in prose, paeon included, because in that case “prose becomes a poem.” But it is at this point that he illustrates his recommended prose rhythm by quoting three fragments of *poetry* composed in paeans.

FOLLOWING THE LEAD OF THE POETS

Aristotle evidently believed that oratorical prose was evolving in a manner not unlike the process that in his view had already taken place in tragedy. In *Rhetoric* 3, he notes that older prose writers used a “running” style of composition, whereas “now not many do”; the moderns instead use the “turned-down” or periodic style. He observes that the paeonic rhythm “came into use beginning with Thrasymachus,” even though “people at the time did not recognize what it was.” And a poetic style of prose “came into existence” when earlier figures such as Gorgias endeavored to imitate the successes achieved by the poets “through their *lexis*.” Though still popular with the uneducated, Aristotle contends, this is not the appropriate style for prose; prose writers should break with that precedent and instead try to match Euripides’ innovations in the tragic drama.⁹⁴

Not only did prose, as a literary medium, trail behind poetry in its development, but the understanding of prose and its style was in a similarly incipient state. In the mid-fourth century, popular audiences could still be dazzled by sheer virtuosity or simple novelty. Specialists—the teachers of rhetoric, their rivals, and their critics—were only now beginning serious reflection on the *lexis* of prose.

⁹⁴*Rhetoric* 3.9.2 1409a27–29 (the old “strung-on” style vs. periodic style); 3.8.4 1409a1–4 (Thrasymachus’ innovative use of the paeon); 3.1.9 1404a24–27 (Gorgias’ “poetic” style); 3.2.5 1404b24–26 (advice to follow Euripides’ lead).

Though Aristotle clearly sees himself as a pioneer in this area (as in many others), the texts of Alcidamas and Isocrates show that he did not develop his ideas in a vacuum. All three contributed to an emerging theory that focused on the critical evaluation of style, proposing standards for distinguishing good style from bad. These standards for evaluating prose style, no less than the vocabulary for discriminating among prose styles, developed out of reflection on the style of poetry and on prose's relationship to the older verbal art. In the age that invented prose, poetry thus remained the yardstick by which this innovation was measured. Nevertheless, the very basic division between poetry and prose in early style theory is a troubled one, as fragile as it is pervasive.⁹⁵

⁹⁵The author thanks *Rhetorica's* editor, Harvey Yunis, and the journal's reviewers for suggestions that have helped to improve this essay.