Landmark Essays on Classical Greek Rhetoric, ed. Edward Schiappa. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994.

Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric

by John Poulakos

When Hegel undertook to reanimate the Sophists,[1] he established with poignant observations that the message of those itinerant teachers of culture was a natural as well as a necessary link between Pre-Socratic (especially Anaxagoran) and Platonic thought.[2] Thus, he endowed their views with intellectual integrity on the one hand, and gave them a place in the history of philosophy on the other. The recent plenitude of sophistic studies shows that Hegel's work was not an instance of philosophical lightning but an origin of things to come. But whereas he and others[3] after him have placed the Sophists' views historically or topically, the meaning of their rhetorical perspective has not received adequate attention.

This essay presumes that without the Sophists our picture of the rhetoric that came out of the Greek experience is incomplete. For over two millennia we have relied almost exclusively on the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of discourse while we have treated the sophistic position as an obscure but interesting historical footnote. And despite Hegel's and others' efforts to rehabilitate the Sophists, we are still bound to the directives of Plato's system of Idealism and Aristotle's system of Development. But because rhetoric came about as an activity grounded in human experience, not in philosophical reflection, we must approach it by looking at those who practiced it before turning to those who reflected about it.

In recent years the above position has been espoused by many students and teachers of rhetoric. Thus far, however, it has led mainly to studies enabling us to better understand individual Sophists. But if Greek rhetoric is indeed a trilogy, we need to concern ourselves with its first part, which to this day remains fragmentary. To do so, we must reexamine the surviving

Reprinted from *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 16 (1983): 35-48.

[1] By "Sophists" I refer to those commonly recognized as the major figures of this group of teachers of rhetoric i.e., Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Antiphon, Hippias, Critias, and Thrasymachus.

[2] G. F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), pp. 352-54.

[3] See Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954); Laszlo Versényi, *Socratic Humanism*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1963); E. M. Cope, "On the Sophistical Rhetoric," *Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology*, 2 (1855), 126-69, 3 (1856), 34-80, 253-88. For a more detailed list, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists*, (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 9-13.

fragments of and about the Sophists and seek to articulate on probable grounds their view of rhetoric. This essay purports to do just that. More specifically, it purports to derive a "sophistic" definition of rhetoric and to discuss some of its more important implications.[4]

Although not as rigorous systematizers of thought as Plato or Aristotle, the Sophists were the first to infuse rhetoric with life. Indebted only to the poetry of their past, not to any formal rhetorical theory, they found themselves free to experiment playfully with form and style and to fashion their words in the Greek spirit of excellence. Aware of the human limitations in the acquisition of knowledge, they sought to ground the abstract notions of their predecessors[5] in the actuality of everydayness. Conscious of people's susceptibility to each others' language, they taught eloquence whose peculiar characteristic is "to show the manifold points of view existing in a thing, and to give force to those which harmonize with what appears to me to be more useful."[6] As practitioners and teachers of rhetoric, the Sophists made Greece aware of her culture and demonstrated to the rest of the world that rhetoric is an integral part of the social life of all civilized people.[7]

The definition I wish to advance is: *Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible.* Very briefly, this definition intimates that rhetoric is an artistic undertaking which concerns itself with the how, the when, and the what of expression and understands the why of purpose. Further, this definition links rhetoric to a movement originating in the sphere of actuality and striving to attain a place in that of potentiality. The following discussion focuses on key notions and terms which, if seen together, constitute a coherent and defensible position on rhetoric. The example of the Sophists suggests that the notions and terms to be investigated are rhetoric as art, style as personal expression, *kairos* (the opportune moment), *to prepon* (the appropriate), and *to dynaton* (the possible).

The Sophists conceived of rhetoric primarily as a *techné*[7] (art) whose medium is *logos* and whose double aim is *terpsis* (aesthetic pleasure) and *pistis* (belief).[8] The evidence supporting their artistic view comes from several sources. According to Philodemus, Metrodorus seems to make it clear enough

[4] When I say "sophistic" rhetoric, I do not mean to disregard the fact that in many cases the Sophists differed in their views on rhetoric. Rather, I mean to emphasize those common elements among them which permit us to regard them as a group.

[5] Hegel, p. 355.

[6] Ibid., p. 358.

[7] Regarding the meaning of the term *techné*, Guthrie remarks: "No English word produces exactly the same effect as the Greek *techné*. 'Art' suffers from its aesthetic associations, and also from the opposition between 'the arts' and the natural sciences. Those who know no Greek may be helped by the term itself: its incorporation in our 'technical' and 'technology' is not fortuitous. It includes every branch of human or divine (cf. Plato, *Soph.* 265e) skill, or applied intelligence, as opposed to the unaided work of nature." *The Sophists*, p. 115, n. 3.

[8] For an insightful discussion on the relationship between *pistis* and *terpsis* see Charles P. Segal, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 66 (1962), 119ff.

that "the rhetoric of the Sophists has the status of an Art."[9] On a more specific comment, Philostratus claims that within Antiphon's forensic speeches "lies all that is derived from the art [of rhetoric]" (87 B44a). Similarly, Suidas informs us that Thrasymachus wrote, among other things, "a rhetorical art" (85 A1). In Plato's *Protagoras* (317b), Protagoras discloses that he has been many years "in the art" while Gorgias asserts in the *Gorgias* (450b) that "the rhetorical art is about words" and boasts in the same dialogue, (456b), that he often persuaded reluctant patients to submit to medical treatment "through no other art than the rhetorical." In his *Encomium to Helen* (13), Gorgias extends his conception of rhetoric by implying that if a speech is to be persuasive it must be "written with art."

Conceiving of rhetoric as art is important because on the one hand it designates the sophistic view proper[10] and on the other it helps place the controversy between Plato and the Sophists in the right light. In particular, one may argue, rhetoric as art does not admit criteria appropriate to strictly epistemological or axiological matters; nor does it call for the same considerations which rhetoric as argument does. Thus, some of the well-known Platonic charges against rhetoric become inapplicable.[11] In distinction to *episteme*, rhetoric does not strive for cognitive certitude, the affirmation of logic, or the articulation of universals. Conditioned by the people who create it, rhetoric moves beyond the domain of logic and, satisfied with probability, lends itself to the flexibility of the contingent.[12] Because the sophistic notion of rhetoric as art is a topic too large for the purposes of this essay, the following comments will be limited to the sophistic concern for the artistic aspect of discourse, or style.

The story of the Sophists' preoccupation with style is too well-known to be recounted here. Collectively, they were held in contempt for dealing with "the non-essentials" of rhetoric.[13] However, this preoccupation seems to have arisen from the realization, expressed later by Aristotle, that "the way a thing is said does affect its intelligibility."[14] Antiphon is quite explicit about the

[9] Philodemus, *Rhetoric* II, 49. Cited in Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1952), 85 B7a. All subsequent fragments are from this source. The translation of this fragment is by Francis E. Sparshott in Rosamond K. Sprague, ed., *The Older Sophists*, (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1972). Unless otherwise specified, the translations which follow are mine. I have taken fewer liberties with the texts than have other translators and have tried to remain as faithful as possible to the Greek. As a result, the reader will note, the English in several cases is awkward.

[10] In the *Gorgias* 463b, Socrates refers to rhetoric as *kolakeia* (flattery) and refutes Gorgias by saying that rhetoric is not art but *empeiria* and *tribé* (habitude and knack). On the other hand, Aristotle, although he does refer to rhetoric as art (*Rhetoric* 1402a), conceives of it primarily as a faculty (*dynamis*) (*Rhetoric* 1355b and 1359b).

[11] For Plato's criticism of rhetoric see the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*.

[12] A useful discussion of the notion of contingency is provided by Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," *Central States Speech Journal*, 15 (November 1967), pp. 9-17.

[13] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1354a.

[14] Ibid., 1404a. This is Rhys Roberts' translation and I have included it for syntactical purposes. A more literal translation is given by E. M. Cope: "for it makes *some* difference in the clearness of an explanation whether we speak in one way or another" in John E. Sandys, ed., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1877).

grave consequences of effective or ineffective style when he says: "it is as unfair that a bad choice of words should cause a man of good behavior to be put to death as it is that a good choice of words should lead to the acquittal of a criminal."[15] Of course, there is room to argue that stylistic emphasis in discourse, that is, emphasis of the how over the what, displays a preference indicative of misplaced values. But however small its value, style is an inescapable reality of speech, one which must be attended to necessarily. Aristotle himself, who insists on the primacy of facts and their proof,[16] acknowledges the reality and necessity of style when he writes: "it is not sufficient to know *what* one ought to say, but it is necessary also to know *how* one ought to say it."[17] So, to the extent that style is allowed to be seen primarily as an aesthetical issue, the question of its superiority or inferiority to content, essentially an axiological question, becomes secondary.

The evidence of the Sophists' excellence in style is plentiful. Protagoras, who on some matters held the same opinion with Diagoras, is said to have "used different words in order to avoid its extreme forcefulness" (80 A23). Philostratus reports in the *Lives of the Sophists* that Gorgias, who did for rhetoric as much as Aeschylus did for tragedy, "was an example of forcefulness to the Sophists and of marvels and inspiration and of giving utterance to great subjects in the grand style, and of detached phrases and transitions, through which speech becomes sweeter than itself and more pompous, and he also introduced poetical words for ornament and dignity" (82 A1 [2]).[18] Xenophon, after recreating the tale of Hercules' dilemma between Virtue and Vice, tells us that Prodicus, its original author, "embellished the [above] thoughts with still more magnificent words than I [have done] just now" (84 B2 [34]). Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes that Thrasymachus was "clean-cut and subtle and formidable in inventing and expressing tersely and extraordinarily that which he wants" (85 A13). According to Philostratus, Hippias "used to enchant Greece at Olympia with varied and well-heeded speeches" (86 A2 [7]). Philostratus praises Antiphon's *On Concord* by saying that it contains "brilliant and wise maxims and narrative elevated and flowered with poetical names and diffuse exposition like the smoothness of the plain" (87 B44a). Philostratus also praises the speech of Kritias for being "sweet . . . and smooth like the west breeze" (88 A1).

As the historical record indicates, the Sophists were master rhetoricians. That their excellence in the area of style has often been construed as a liability is due partly to Plato's influence on posterity and partly to the

[15] J. S. Morrison's translation in *The Older Sophists*.
[16] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1404a.
[17] Ibid., 1403b. Emphasis added.
[18] With the exception of minor changes, this is George Kennedy's translation in *The Older Sophists*. On a more focused comment, Suidas writes that Gorgias "was the first to give to the rhetorical genre the verbal power and art of deliberate culture and employed tropes and metaphors and allegories and hypallage and catachreses and hyperbata and doublings of words and repetitions and apostrophes and isokola" (82 A2) (Kennedy's translation with minor changes).

excesses of some of their successors. But if it is agreed that what is said must be said somehow, and that the how is a matter of the speaker's choice, then style betrays the speaker's unique grasp of language and becomes the peculiar expression of his personality.[19] If this is so, the Sophists need no longer be misunderstood. As some of their artifacts reveal, they were highly accomplished linguistic craftsmen with a heightened sense of the nature of *logos*, their medium.[20]

As the suggested definition of rhetoric implies, the Sophists were interested in the problem of time in relation to speaking. At least one of them, Gorgias, asserted that situations have a way of revealing themselves to man and of eliciting responses from him. As he states in his treatise *On Non-being or On Nature*, "the external becomes the revealer of *logos*" (82 B3 [85]). But Gorgias was not alone in asserting that situations exist in time and that speech as a situational response does also. The Sophists stressed that speech must show respect to the temporal dimension of the situation it addresses, that is, it must be timely. In other words, speech must take into account and be guided by the temporality of the situation in which it occurs.

For the most part, what compels a rhetor to speak is a sense of urgency. Under normal circumstances, that is, under circumstances in which we are composed and things are "under control," there is no pressing need to speak. But during times of stress, we feel compelled to intervene and, with the power of the word, to attempt to end a crisis, redistribute justice, or restore order. In his *Defense of Palamedes* (32), Gorgias has the speaker say, following a lengthy statement of self-praise: "But [ordinarily] it is not for me to praise myself; but the present moment necessitated . . . that I defend myself in every way possible." Illustrating the same point, Thrasymachus, we are told, once addressed the Athenians by saying: "I wish, Athenians, that I had belonged to that time when silence sufficed for young people, since the state of affairs did not force them to make speeches and the older men were managing the city properly. But since our fortune has reserved us . . . misfortunes . . . one really has to speak"[21] (85 B1). In the former example it is urgent that the defendant reinstate his threatened reputation while in the latter it is crucial that the citizens protest against the injurious practices of their civic leaders.

Both of the above examples imply that ideas have their place in time and unless they are given existence, unless they are voiced at the precise moment

[19] Georges Gusdorf, the phenomenologist, says that "style signifies the task given to man of becoming aware of perspective. Each of us, even the most simple of mortals, is charged with finding the expression to fit his situation. Each of us is charged with realizing himself in a language, a personal echo of the language of all which represents his contribution to the human world. The struggle for style is the struggle for consciousness (la vie spirituelle)" in *Speaking* (*La Parole*), trans. Paul Brockelman (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1965), p. 76.
[20] Bromley Smith demonstrates how this is so in his article "Gorgias: A Study of Oratorical Style," *Quarterly Journal of Speech Education*, 7 (1921), 335-59.
[21] Sparshott's translation in *The Older Sophists*.

they are called upon, they miss their chance to satisfy situationally shared voids within a particular audience. Moreover, the two examples seem to restrict speaking to only those times calling for it, and to suggest that silence be the alternative at all other times. In fact, Gorgias praises the dead in his *Epitaphios* for having known when to speak (*legein*) and when to be silent (*sigan*) (B6).

Clearly, speaking involves a temporal choice. The choice is not whether to speak but whether to speak now; more precisely, it is whether now is the time to speak. When a rhetor speaks, he responds to a situation. But the fact that he speaks now, the fact that he has chosen this moment over another reminds the listener that the situation is ephemeral, urgent, and, by implication, significant. But if the rhetor chooses to address the present, he also agrees to confront the contingent elements of the situation as they unfold. As such, he is taking on a risk, the risk that his timing might not coincide with the temporal needs of the situation. According to Philostratus, Gorgias, who held in contempt those who spoke about "things that had been said many times," devoted himself to what was timely (82 A24). Further, Gorgias "was the first to proclaim himself willing to take this risk . . . that he would trust to the opportune moment to speak on any subject" (82 A1a). That addressing the present requires courage and involves the taking of a risk is apparent in the compromise of extemporaneous speaking, the kind which literally occurs out of time. Prepared speech texts betray our insensitivity to and insecurity about all that is contingent in the act of speaking. Prepared texts have a designated time in the future and a prefabricated content. But by designating the time and by prefabricating the content of a speech, we are essentially setting the parameters of a situation to come and prepare ourselves in advance to treat it in its fixity. This compromise we make out of our apprehension regarding the indeterminate aspects of a situation to which we have no immediate access.[22] The example of several Sophists, most notably that of Gorgias and Hippias, suggests that an accomplished speaker has no need for notes or a text, rehearsal, or presituational practice.

The sophistic insistence that speaking be done with respect to time does not stem from a philosophical position regarding the nature of *logos* but from the observation that if what is said is timely, its timeliness renders it more sensible, more rightful, and ultimately more persuasive. Reportedly, Protagoras was the first to expound on "the power of the opportune moment" to give speech advantages it otherwise would not have (80 A1). In the anonymous sophistic treatise *Dissoi Logoi* 2(19), the author is quite explicit about this point. Specifically, he states that "nothing is always virtuous, nor [always] disgraceful, but taking the same things the opportune moment made disgraceful and after changing [them made them] virtuous." Clearly, the notion of

[22]For a discussion of the merits of impromptu speaking, see Alcidamas' *On Those Who Write Written Speeches or On the Sophists*. Since Alcidamas was Gorgias' student, it is not unreasonable to suppose that some of his views coincide with those of other Sophists.

kairos points out that speech exists in time; but more important, it constitutes a prompting toward speaking and a criterion of the value of speech.[23] In short, *kairos* dictates that what is said must be said at the right time.

In conjunction with the notion of *kairos*, the Sophists gave impetus to the related concept of *to prepon* (the appropriate) apparently prescribing that what is said must conform to both audience and occasion. Illustrating *to prepon*, Gorgias praises in his *Epitaphios* the dead for having been "well-disposed toward the appropriate," while in his *Defense of Palamedes* (28) he has the defendant admit that what he is about to say is "inappropriate to one who has not been accused but suitable to one who has been accused." In the same speech, Gorgias strongly implies that the strategy of a legal defense depends largely on the speaker's audience. Specifically, he has the defendant state that while it is useful to employ appeals to pity and entreaties and the intercession of friends when the trial takes place before a mob, before noble and wise judges one must concentrate on the explanation of the truth (33).

A complement to the notion of *kairos*, *to prepon* points out that situations have formal characteristics, and demands that speaking as a response to a situation be suitable to those very characteristics. Both notions are concerned with the rhetor's response; but while the former is interested in the when, the latter is concerned with the what of speaking. *To prepon* requires that speech must take into account and be guided by the formal structure of the situation it addresses. Like *kairos*, *to prepon* constitutes not only a guide to what must be said but also a standard of the value of speech.[24] In distinction to *kairos*, which focuses on man's sense of time, *to prepon* emphasizes his sense of propriety.

Appropriateness refers to that quality which makes an expression be correlative to the formal aspects of the situation it addresses. When appropriate, speech is perfectly compatible with the audience and the occasion it affirms and simultaneously seeks to alter. An appropriate expression reveals the rhetor's rhetorical readiness and evokes the audience's gratitude; conversely, an inappropriate expression indicates a misreading on the rhetor's part and a mismeeting between rhetor and audience. If what is spoken is the result of a misreading on the part of the rhetor, it subsequently becomes obvious to us, even to him, that "this was not the right thing to say." If silence is called for and the response is speech, we have a rhetor misspeaking to an audience not ready to listen, or not ready to listen to what he has to say, or ready to listen but not to the things he is saying. If speech is needed and silence prevails instead, we have a rhetor who has misread the situation, a frustrated audience whose needs and expectations are not met, and a situation

[23]This view is expressed by Isocrates in *Against the Sophists* 293(13): "for it is not possible for speeches to be good if they do not partake of the opportune moments, and the appropriate and the novel." For a treatment of the moment as a criterion of the value of speech, see Gusdorf's *Speaking* (*La Parole*), p. 85.

[24]Ibid.

that perpetuates itself.

Both timeliness and appropriateness are rhetorical motifs whose essence cannot be apprehended strictly cognitively and whose application cannot be learnt mechanically.[25] As George Kennedy states, "The two together constitute what may be called the artistic elements in rhetorical theory as opposed to the prescribed rules."[26] Unlike rigid scientific principles, the two are more a matter of feeling. Some of the factors contributing to one's sense of the timely and the appropriate are one's discretionary powers, the cultural norms in which he participates, his reading of the situation he wishes to address, his image of his audience, and his prediction of the potential effects of his words on his listeners. Timeliness and appropriateness are similar qualities in the sense that they render an expression more persuasive. What is said, then, must be both appropriate to time, or timely, and appropriate to the audience and the occasion. Untimely and appropriate speech cannot move an audience because it is untimely; similarly, timely and inappropriate speech cannot achieve its aims because it is inappropriate. If persuasion is to occur, both qualities must be present in the spoken word. In short, the right thing must be said at the right time; inversely, the right time becomes apparent precisely because the right thing has been spoken.

As pointed out earlier, these two qualities are vague in conceptualization and elastic in application. Their observance does not "confine reality within a dogmatic scheme but allow[s] it to rage in all its contradictions, in all its tragic intensity, in all its impartiality imposed by an intelligibility which will revive the joy of truth."[27] Because the rhetorician concerns himself with the particular and the pragmatic, his way is not that of an abstract absolutism created in the spirit of *a priori* truths; rather, it is that of a relativism of concrete rhetorical situations to which situationally derived truths are the only opportune and appropriate responses.

But the rhetorician is not confined to a single movement. After he captures the appropriate and places it temporally, he moves toward the suggestion of the possible. The starting point for the articulation of the possible is the ontological assumption that the main driving forces in man's life are his desires,[28] especially the desire to be other and to be elsewhere. Another relevant assumption is that the sphere of actuality always entails a lack, the absence of that which exists only in the future; more particularly, that actuality frustrates man when he dreams of being other and binds him to where he already is when he wants to be elsewhere.

Consideration of the possible affirms in man the desire to be at another place or at another time and takes him away from the world of actuality and transports him in that of potentiality. Moreover, it intensifies in him the

[25] Untersteiner stresses this point in *The Sophists*, p. 198.
[26] George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), p. 67.
[27] Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, p. xvi.
[28] Hegel, p. 358.

awareness that actuality is hostile to what he wishes and, as such, denies its existence. Finally, it refines his wishes and shows him how to apply them, what to ask, and whom to reach.[29] To be sure, man walks on earth and his feet are a constant reminder of his connection to the ground. But at the same time, he looks at the horizon about him and perceives himself "not as he is, not where he is, but precisely as he is not and where he is not." Even though he functions daily in the world of actuality, he often finds himself concerned with his situation not as it is here-and-now but as it could be there-and-then. Thus, he participates at once in two worlds each of which opposes the other. For Georges Poulet, man finds himself in "Two realities which simultaneously exist at a distance and which reciprocally deny each other: the reality in which one lives and that in which one does not live, the place in which one has situated one's dream and the place where with horror one sees oneself surrendered to chance and ill luck."[30]

This is where the rhetorician steps in and helps him resolve his existential dilemma. By exploiting people's proclivity to perceive themselves in the future and their readiness to thrust themselves into unknown regions, the rhetorician tells them what they could be, brings out in them futuristic versions of themselves, and sets before them both goals and the directions which lead to those goals. All this he does by creating and presenting to them that which has the potential to be, but is not. Thus it is no paradox to say that rhetoric strives to create and labors to put forth, to propose that which is not.

The rhetorician concerns himself with the possible because he refuses to keep people in their actual situation. Granted, he must initially address them as they are and where they are. The earlier discussion about *kairos* and *to prepon* established that. But subsequently he tries to lift them from the vicissitudes of custom and habit and take them into a new place where new discoveries and new conquests can be made. Gorgias hints at this notion in the *Encomium to Helen* (5) when he states that "to tell the knowing what they know has credibility but brings no delight." Gorgias is stressing here that to speak about actualities to those who are already aware of them is nearly a purposeless act[31] whose most notable defect is that it fails to please the audience. But if by relying on actualities we fall short of our rhetorical ends, where should we turn? The *Encomium to Helen* suggests that the province of rhetoric is the possible, that which has not yet occurred to the audience. Following his own example, Gorgias argues that one of the causes of Helen's abduction is the might of *logos* (a presumably novel idea not previously entertained by those familiar with her story.)

[29] Georges Poulet, *The Interior Distance*, trans. Elliott Coleman (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 239.
[30] Ibid., p. 240.
[31] Aristotle points out that "about those things which we know or have decided there is no further use in speaking about them" *Rhetoric* 1391b.

A special dimension of the possible, then, is afforded by the novel,[32] the unusual, that prior to which we have no awareness, the unprecedented. As a group, the Sophists are known to have been the first to say or do a number of things. Several fragments testify to their novel claims and practices: 80 A1 (51) and (52); 82 A1(1), Ala, A4(4); 84 A10; 85 A3; 86 A2. Xenophon tells us that Hippias told Socrates once: "I always try to say something new"[33] [86 A14 (6)] clarifying at the same time that he did so on matters which admit of subjective treatment (i.e., justice) and agreeing that on such subjects as arithmetic the novel has no place. Aristotle, pointing out one of the effects of the novel on audiences, refers to Prodicus, who thought that announcing that what one is about to say has never been heard before can literally awaken a drowsy audience (*Rhetoric* 1415b). Read together, the above fragments imply, as Aristotle remarks, that people are "admirers of things which are not part of their experience" (*Rhetoric* 1404b), and are drawn to them because they raise their curiosity and carry an element of surprise. New thoughts, new insights, and new ideas always attract our attention not only because we have not encountered them before but also because they offer us new ways to perceive ourselves and the world. On the other hand, things with which we are familiar condition our responses and restrict our actions.

The possible is the opposite of the actual. A derivative of the Heracleitan perspective, evoking the possible challenges the one and advances the manifold; it rejects permanence and favors change; it privileges becoming over being. Unlike the actual, the possible is not a given which can be known or verified; it exists in the future as something incomplete and dormant, something awaiting the proper conditions to be realized. Therefore, its evocation goes hand in hand with hope and modesty; hope because the speaker always awaits his listeners' contribution, which will bring the possible to completion and realization; and modesty because what the speaker says is always potentially dismissable. By voicing the possible, the rhetor discloses his vision of a new world to his listeners and invites them to join him there by honoring his disclosure and by adopting his suggestion. Essentially, he is asking them to abandon the shelter of their prudential heaven and opt for that which exists "by favor of human imagination and effort ."[34] Of course, the risk always exists that the audience may decline his invitation. But this is a risk he must face if he dares stand up and offer an alternative to the mundanity, the mediocrity, or misery of those he wishes to address.

The possible is an aspect of non-actuality claiming that, given the proper

[32] See n. 23.

[33] Ibid. As if he is echoing Hippias' comment, Gusdorf writes: "The great artist avoids imitating even himself. He continually undertakes the task of remaining vigilantly aware of the world of words, a task for ever unfinished because the world changes and is renewed, and living man with it" [*Speaking* (*La Parole*), p. 75].

[34] Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), p. 20.

chance, it can turn into something actual. And even though it opposes the actual, it always seeks to become actualized. In and through the speech of the rhetor, the seed of the possible is planted in the ground of actuality. However, its roots do not begin to form until the audience fails to see "why not," until they cannot find any reason to frustrate or repudiate it. Granted, the rhetor must show them why they ought to adopt his possible; the tradition of rhetoric demands that propositions be justified. At the same time, he must go one step further and ask them to find reasons, their reasons, should they be inclined to say no. Thus, Gorgias asks in the *Encomium to Helen* (12): "What cause then prevents the conclusion that Helen . . . might have come under the influence of speech?" This rhetorical question pits the actual belief (Helen is blameworthy as a woman with loose morals) against the possible belief (she is not to blame because she fell under the might of speech). The same approach is taken by Thrasymachus, who asks in *The Constitution* (B1): "Why should anyone put off speaking [what] is in his mind, if [it has fallen] to him to be injured by the present situation and he thinks he is on to something that will put an end to such things?" In this instance, the possible Thrasymachus wishes to have his listeners adopt is speaking openly and with no hesitation, something which presumably will end their pain. In both cases, the rhetor is asking the audience to discover at least one reason why the conclusion suggested should not be the case. Should they fail, they ought to adopt what he says; should they succeed, they have grounds on which to reject what he advocates. In the former case, the possible is well on its way to actuality; but even in the latter, it has served a useful function: it has provided the challenge in response to which the listeners have reexamined their actual situation. That they may decide to affirm their previously held views is not that important. What is more important is that by doing so they have moved from accepting actuality uncritically, as it is and because it is, to accepting it deliberately, because it has withstood the challenge of a possible. To use Heidegger's language, they have moved closer to the realm of authenticity.

In this essay I have argued that the history of rhetoric dictates that the Sophists' views regarding the art of discourse need wider notice and further exploration. Extracting key ideas and terms from the preserved fragments of the Sophists, I have suggested a "sophistic" definition of rhetoric founded on and consistent with the notions of rhetoric as art, style as personal expression, the timely, the appropriate, and the possible. This definition posits that man is driven primarily by his desire to be other, the wish to move from the sphere of actuality to that of possibility. Moreover, it points out that as man becomes what he is not he encounters situations to which he often responds with language. It also suggests that if man's responses are to be effective, they must take into account the temporal and formal structure of the situations he addresses. As such, they must be guided by his sense of time and propriety, and must be formulated in ways consonant with himself. Finally, this definition stresses that the whole enterprise of symbolic expression falls within the region of art.