

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL-POETIC INTERPRETATION OF PLATO'S *SOPHIST*

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1. Introduction

The later dialogues of Plato, especially the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, have presented difficulties to some interpreters because of the apparent failure of the dialectical method to achieve unequivocal 'solutions' to the 'problems' discussed in these works. But perhaps the fault is not on the part of Plato. As John Sallis suggests, the *logical* presuppositions inherent in "our distinctively non-Greek perspective" lead us to read dialogues such as the *Sophist* as if the *logoi* of these dialogues were "'arguments' in the sense approximating that determined in modern 'symbolic' logic," a reading which unfortunately precludes the appropriation of a deeper and more meaningful *sense* of the dialogue. Consequently, Sallis goes on to ask:

Is it perhaps the case that in this sense there are no arguments in the *Sophist*, nor perhaps in any Platonic dialogues--that precisely what certain dialogues show forth regarding *logos* precludes their assuming such a form? Is it perhaps the case that the bindingness which some--if not all--Platonic *logoi* exercise upon us is of a different order? Is the relevant bindingness perhaps such as can least of all be measured by something like a "logical" refutation? Must we not resolutely refuse to rest secure in the "achievements" of modern logic if we are to prepare ourselves for a re-thinking of the Platonic reflection on *logos*? Is it so preposterous to suppose that even we moderns must attend to our ignorance?¹

With this hermeneutic interrogatory in mind, and focusing specifically on the *Sophist*, this paper intends to elaborate an orientation for investigating the apparent failure of Plato's dialectical method--an orientation suggested by Sallis' reflections and one which will be shown to be intrinsic to the form and content of the *Sophist* itself. Let us call this orientation "philosophical poetics."

¹ Sallis, J. *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1975, p. 484.

Generally speaking, philosophical poetics is a process of thinking that is distinguished from calculative, logical or propositional thinking. The term "poetic" is employed here along the lines of its usage in the later works of Martin Heidegger where it takes on ontological proportions: poetry is the most authentic form of man's dwelling; it is a measure for all measuring; it is the ground which is itself grounded in the ungrounded--what Heidegger calls the *Abgrund*.² This primordial "dwelling" is a linguistic orientation to the textuality of life and to the life of the text which, as Merleau-Ponty has said, "must be poetry; that is, it must completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen....of knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own."³ From a hermeneutical perspective, the poetic word is understood here as dialectical in the Platonic sense of following the to-and-fro play of question and answer, and speculative in the Hegelian sense, as Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, "in that the linguistic event of the poetic word expresses its own relationship to being."⁴ The reading of the *Sophist* presented in this essay is an attempt to utilize and develop poetic thinking as a methodological orientation and at the same time to show that the *Sophist* itself is a demonstration of the necessity of this kind of thinking for authentic philosophical discourse.

Cognizant of the Kantian dictum that in philosophy--as a discursive operation of reason--definition is something to be achieved at the end rather than a place from which to begin, I would like to propose a working sketch of the fundamental aspects of philosophical poetics which will be fleshed out more fully in the subsequent reflections on the *Sophist*. This question of beginnings and ends (the hermeneutical circle and the perennial problem of the preface) is intrinsic to the speculative, dialectical nature of philosophical poetics and will be addressed in more detail below.

Philosophical poetics is, first of all, relational and contextual. The unconcealment of truth (Heidegger's *aletheia*) in the philosophical poetic process emerges through a

²For a detailed analysis of Heidegger's development of the poetic, see David Halliburton, *Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

³Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Signs*. Trans. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964; p.52.

⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Trans. from 2nd ed. (1965), ed. G. Barrett and J. Cumming. Tubingen, 1960; New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982; p.427.

synergistic interaction between reader and text motivated by a negative operation of longing or desire for the emergence of that truth within a larger context of openness. It is a process of *living* this linguistic truth rather than presumptuously grasping it. Secondly, this essential openness is an attitude of the whole person (as opposed to a process of abstract reasoning alone) characterized by a disposition of willingness to be changed by the as yet unknown truth--a disposition found equally in the poetic word itself. Philosophical poetics thus has a therapeutic element insofar as it involves a commitment of trust and a real, personal risk in the hope of obtaining an increase of self-understanding through an exposure of oneself to the world revealed by the text. Thirdly, philosophical-poetics is opposed to all dogmatism while recognizing what Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty point out as the necessary prejudice of human facticity or historical/bodily being-in-the-world. Thus, it does not attempt to achieve final, *apodictic* answers or solutions to problems. Rather it is a way of generating new and more meaningful questions within the philosophical tradition. Finally, the willingness to engage oneself in this risky process is generated by a sense of mystery--what Plato calls "the divine" and what I have characterized as the unspeakable--a sense that there is always "something more" beyond the sum of all the most articulate formulations of truth for the explorer of thought who would dare attempt to speak the presence/absence of this unspeakable mystery.

It is my contention that these features of philosophical poetics--relationality, openness, a therapeutic element, holism, trust, risk, anti-dogmatism and a desire to know the unknowable or speak the unspeakable--are all operative in the *Sophist*. Let us look more closely at this dialogue in order to see how the philosophical poetic approach can reveal the apparent failure of Plato's dialectical method there to be its true success.

2. Fundamental Textual Processes

By the time one arrives at the end of the *Sophist* it ought to be clear that nothing can be discussed in isolation. And a return to the beginning of the dialogue confirms that this contention, in fact, had been indicated very early. For the question of "what it means to be a sophist," which ostensibly leads the interlocutors of the dialogue through

a lengthy dialectical labyrinth, is already one step removed from a more essential question posed at the outset concerning the nature of philosophy itself, as well as that kind of thinking which is proper to the philosophical enterprise. To understand the meaning of the *Sophist*, therefore, and why it concerns itself with the identity of the sophist and the relationship Being/non-Being, it is necessary to begin by considering this more fundamental question and the peculiar assertion from which it is dialectically generated.

The *Sophist* opens with a meeting of friends--a centrifugal event in the drama which is frequently overlooked as interpreters rush headlong into the disputation which follows. Yet it is in the context of this gathering of friends that we find an important foreshadowing of the way in which Being/non-Being conceals and reveals itself in philosophical thinking. As the curtain rises, Socrates and a group of his followers are joined by Theodorus who has brought with him a friend, the Stranger from Elea. This meeting of friends should be thought of as neither an incidental literary device nor as merely an historical or political gathering contingent on Socrates' legal predicament. Rather, it is a gathering which creates a deeper ontological clearing from which the dialogue will operate.

Socrates' first comment after the Stranger has been introduced confirms this hypothesis and establishes the speculative tone of the dialogue: "Perhaps, Theodorus," Socrates says, "it is no ordinary guest but some god you have brought us unawares" (*Sophist*, 216 a).⁵ One is immediately struck by the outlandishness of this bald conjecture. As if he too feels the need to support it, Socrates quickly cites the authority of Homer (the poet *par excellence* of the relationship between gods and men). But this does not diffuse the radicality of the assertion. Socrates perceives something in this gathering of friends, and particularly in the presence/absence of the Eleatic Stranger, that the others do not see. Perhaps this Stranger is really a god in disguise. Perhaps he is "the god of strangers (who) comes to mark the orderly or lawless doings of

⁵All citations of Plato's *Sophist* are from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 11th ed., trans. Cooper et al., ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Bollingen Foundation Series LXXI. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

mankind," (*Sophist*, 216 b). But why is the god who marks the orderly and the lawless specifically connected with the Stranger?

No doubt there is something peculiar about this Stranger from Elea. It is not without purpose that Plato has refrained from giving him a name. But this anonymity cannot be adequately explained as a shield behind which Plato is cowering out of fear of real or imagined political reprisal. Although there may be some truth to such an historicist interpretation, it tends to obfuscate the more subtle dimensions of Plato's poetic thinking which we wish to bring to light in this essay. The stranger is always the outsider among insiders, the one who is different by virtue of the sameness of the others, the living nexus of identity and difference. He is the nameless one in the dialogue and yet the one who names. There is an aura of darkness and the unknown about him. Socrates says that it is exactly the *Stranger* who "marks," that is, who points out and "measures" (in Heidegger's poetic sense), who sheds light on the situation because he is sufficiently absent to be truly present. As Emmanuel Levinas points out, the locus of the Stranger is the infinite "conjunction" of the same and the other, so that it is "the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*e chez soi*]." ⁶ The stranger represents the darkness without which there could be no light. What kind of illumination can this nameless Stranger shed on genuine philosophical discourse?

We learn from the dialogue that the Stranger is above mere calculative argumentation: "...he is more reasonable than the devotees of verbal dispute," Plato says (*Sophist*, 216 b). Verbal dispute is superficial. It does not see beyond the immediate appearance of the word to that which is "behind" the word. The reason of verbal dispute belongs to the non-contradictory logic of identity--a bloodless logic (skillfully manipulated by sophists) that does not see the forest for the trees. There is nothing divine about verbal dispute. But, as with the Eleatic Stranger, there is "something divine" about any true philosopher. The authentic philosopher deals in a kind of reason which goes beyond the merely verbal level to the heart of the matter. This "higher" reason deals with the mysterious, the transcendent, the true—in Plato's

⁶Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979, p.39.

word, the divine. It is this divine reason (what I would call "poetic thinking")—differentiated by Plato from mere verbal dispute—that marks the authentic philosopher from the non-authentic.

But how are we to know this fundamental distinction between the authentic and the non-authentic, between poetic thinking and mere verbal dispute? For the authentic philosopher, Socrates claims, is as difficult to distinguish from the sham as an immortal is difficult to distinguish from a mortal:

Such men, the genuine, not the sham philosophers—as they go from city to city surveying from a height the life beneath them, appear, owing to the world's blindness, to wear all sorts of shapes. To some they seem of no account, to others above all worth; now they wear the guise of the statesman, now of Sophists, and sometimes they may give the impression of simply being mad" (*Sophist*, 216 c, d).

The entire movement of the dialogue that follows can be understood as an unravelling of this statement.

3. The Philosophical Life

The interrogation of the notion 'Being/non-Being' in the *Sophist* is situated within the ambiguous context of philosophical inquiry as a human/divine task in general, and specifically in terms of the cryptic description Socrates has given to the nature of the genuine philosopher. It is from the myopic perspective of the "world's blindness" that the genuine philosopher appears "to wear all sorts of shapes." What Plato is talking about here has to do with what it means to live an authentic philosophical life. For one thing, it means that the genuine philosopher will not be recognized by those who are living a non-philosophical life. The genuine philosopher is the one set apart, the outsider, the one who differs (and who defers this difference), the truly strange—as original—to himself as well as to others. Sometimes the genuine philosopher will appear to be a bum, a n'er-do-well, "of no account," as Plato says, that is, unable to give an accounting of himself that makes sense in terms of worldly accountability. At other times, however, the genuine philosopher will be perceived as being "above all worth," the saint, the hero, the virtuous man, perhaps the head of a great religion. The genuine philosopher is a person who wears "guises," who lives in a kind of concealment from those who do not have eyes to see or ears to hear. It is questionable at this point in the

dialogue whether it will be possible at all to determine who is and who is not a genuine philosopher. What is clear, however, is that it is the human context of this question that is the ground and foundation of Plato's concern.

Plato is not concerned with abstract verbal dispute for its own sake. He is concerned with the affairs of gods and men. He does not speak of the study of philosophy but of "devotion" to it. The vocabulary of Plato is rooted in a concern for life, both how we are to understand it and how we are to live it. The most lucidly determined and logically consistent philosophical principles would make no sense to Plato if they were severed from their existential ground in the context of human life. It is from this perspective alone that we can understand Socrates' mysterious description of the genuine philosopher. And if the subject of the dialogue later focuses on determining the nature of the relationship between philosophers and sophists, between Being and non-Being, it must be seen, not as an end in itself, but as a means of shedding light on the nature of the genuine philosophical life.

The question of the predication of the term "sophist" is raised by Socrates because the genuine philosopher is sometimes misperceived as being a sophist. Socrates states three typical misperceptions of the genuine philosopher: the statesman, the sophist and the madman. From the context in which these three terms are used, clearly Socrates intends a pejorative connotation—they are simulacra, false perceptions of the genuine article. It is not so much that the "blind" refuse to see what is genuine, as it is that they see in the only way they can. The "lower" cannot see the "higher;" the vulgar cannot see the true philosopher qua philosopher but only as "something less" than that, as something within the range of their own vulgar vision. That is, they can only misperceive him. But are the "worldly" blind solely on their own account or is there not something in the nature of the genuine philosopher that makes it difficult if not impossible to discern him? Is there not something about the relationship of the genuine philosopher to the divine that obscures the manner in which he appears to those who are not so connected? Plato seems to nod affirmatively here. It is necessarily impossible for those who are not open to the manifestness of the divine in the human, the immortal in the mortal, the unspeakable in the speakable, to perceive the true philosopher. This is the basis for Socrates' threefold question concerning the manner in

which the terms "sophist, statesman, philosopher" are predicated: are they three manifestations of a single essence; is the philosopher essentially different from the sophist and statesman; or are they all three essentially different (*Sophist*, 217 a)?

This threefold question must be understood within the context of Socrates' assertion concerning the problematic nature of the true philosopher--the assertion from which it is dialectically generated. The genuine philosopher is enigmatic because there is "something divine" about him. Consequently, he appears to be what he is not. It is exactly this "something divine" which both reveals and conceals the genuine philosopher. He is simultaneously god-like in his unmanifestness, and a sophist, statesman, madman or whatever, in his appearance to others. At the same time that the genuine philosopher is the place where Being is made manifest, he is also the place where non-Being is made manifest precisely in its unmanifestness.

Obviously, there is a contradiction here: how is it possible to both be and not be? The poetic philosopher does not attempt to resolve this contradiction but to penetrate and dwell in it, to live it as Nietzsche taught. It is not a matter of passing beyond the Hegelian notion of understanding (*Verstand*) to Thought (*Vernunft*) as *Wissenschaft* but of dwelling in the dynamic gap of the difference between the two. Given this perspective, the question put to the Stranger by Socrates should not be viewed as an attempt to logically unravel the mystery of identity and difference. It might better be understood as a poetic celebration of it. The dynamic conjunction of opposites (that primordial "*harmonia*" of Heraclitus which became a "yearning" in Socrates and Plato, according to Heidegger⁷) that is manifested/unmanifested in the person of the genuine philosopher will always be misunderstood by those who attempt to methodically separate these inseparable conjuncts in order to grasp them with a mathematical or scientific precision. As the Stranger says later in the dialogue, "the attempt to separate everything from every other thing not only strikes a discordant note but amounts to a crude defiance of the philosophical Muse" (*Sophist*, 259 e). It is a desecration of the divine. It is more fitting to remain "at a loss" concerning the nature of Being/non-Being

⁷Martin Heidegger. *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. W. Kluback and J. T. Wilde. Pfullingen, 1956; New Haven: College and University Press, n.d., p. 51.

than to "fancy we understand...when in fact we are as far as possible from understanding" (*Sophist*, 244 a). Whenever we think we have finally grasped the difference, that is exactly when we have missed it. Insofar as the question of Being/non-Being is grounded in that elusive "something divine" (that Heideggerian abyss of *Ereignis* into which "one falls upward") there will never be an absolute comprehension of either the sameness or difference of what is signified by these terms. Being, Same, Other, Motion and Rest are grounded in the ungrounded (the Pandoran "{es gibt" of the *Ereignis*). And there is no objective, reductionistic or deconstructive way out of this "problem" except through it, i.e. by *entering into it* in the "right" way.

One either has an inexplicable motivation, a longing that opens out towards the divine ground of Being/non-Being or one does not. A conversion of the heart prompted by an inexplicable longing for true knowledge is the entrance way into genuine philosophy. At one point in the dialogue the Stranger asks Theaetetus this question: "Must we not attribute the coming-into-being of these things out of non-being to divine craftsmanship and nothing else?" (*Sophist*, 265 c). It is by the answer given to this question that "the earthborn" are separated from "the more reasonable" men, the sophists from the true philosophers, the sham from the genuine article. At first Theaetetus is unsure: "Perhaps because I am young, I often shift from one belief to the other...(Sophist, 265 d)." Theaetetus is here involved in a struggle through which all must pass who desire to live the true philosophical life. Earlier in the dialogue, while speaking about the intractability of intellectualists on the one hand, and empiricists on the other, the Stranger says: "Best of all, if it were anyhow possible, would be to bring about a real change of heart" (*Sophist*, 246 d) so that both extremists could see the error of their ways. Now Theaetetus is called upon to give an accounting of himself. He is not completely certain he says to the Stranger, "but at this moment, looking at your face and believing you to hold that these things have a divine origin, I too am convinced" (*Sophist*, 265 c).

Something of a conversion has taken place for Theaetetus without which the dialogue could not have proceeded. This is an important point, for if Theaetetus would not have been able to risk openness on the strength of what he "sees" in the Stranger's face, the dialogue would have stopped and the question of belief in the divine origin of

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things would have become paramount. What was true for Theaetetus is also true for any authentic reader of this dialogue.

With these considerations in mind, it might be more fruitful to approach the *Sophist* as a dialectical or narrative poem within the philosophical poetic framework described above rather than as a discursive, metaphysical treatise. Plato himself lends credence to such an interpretation, first, by virtue of his use of dramatic or literary form; second, by his immediate appeal to Homer at the outset of the dialogue; and third, in his clear intent that the dialogue should not be understood as mere verbal dispute. If there is "something divine" about true philosophy this might be considered its *poetic* element. It has already been shown that the irrepressibility yet ineffability of the divine--that which is present precisely in the conspicuousness of its absence--is the basic motive power of the dialogue: the urge to speak the unspeakable. This recognition of the necessary and inextricable connection of what is said to what is unsaid, and of what is unsaid to what is unsayable, situates the *Sophist* in the realm of the poetic.

4. Philosophical-Poetics

To be a great poet is to be a great thinker. Yet, as Heidegger asserts: "The poetic character of thinking is still veiled over. Where it shows itself, it is for a long time like the utopism of a half-poetic intellect."⁸ Commenting on this passage, John D. Caputo says: "When thinking is truly recognized for what it is, its poetic character will be acknowledged. The great poets think, the great thinkers think poetically. That is what Heidegger means by his reference to 'thoughtful poetizing' (@U[*das denken Dichten*])...."⁹ But poetic thinking will never be "understood," never become a "known," defined object of scientific scrutiny. The life of the poet-philosopher is a poem never finished—as no genuine poem is ever "finished." "Who today would presume to claim," Heidegger asks, "that he is at home with the nature of poetry as well as with the nature of thinking and, in addition, strong enough to bring the nature of the two into the most

⁸Heidegger, M. "The Thinker as Poet" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Colophon, 1971, p.12.

⁹Caputo, J.D. *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978, p.235.

extreme discord and so to establish their concord?"¹⁰ This question returns us to the paradoxical process of speaking the unspeakable.

Considered logically, as has already been said, speaking the unspeakable is impossible, contradictory, and meaningless. To approach this "task," formal logic must be superceded in favor of an organic, pre-reflective or poetic "logic." Thus, the Stranger from Elea is driven to a philosophical parricide of "father Parmenides" in order to "establish by main force that what is not, in some respect has being, and conversely that what is, in a way is not" (*Sophist*, 241 d). This parricide of absolute identity allows an opening for a pre-reflective, bodily "knowledge" which is essentially affective and experiential. Its communication is both immediate and indefinite. It is not the verbal transferring of a defined and definite object but the invitation to poetic communion, to an immediate experience of the unique poetic creation; what the Scholastics called "connaturality."¹¹ The question of scientific validity does not exist at this level of knowing since it is proper only to logical, referential reflection. Pre-reflective knowledge is non-transferable as such. It is an on-the-job kind of experience. An authentic poem is never the same poem for any two people who read it. How, then, can we say that we know "the" meaning of the poem? We cannot, for there is no *absolute* meaning--which does not mean that there is no meaning at all. The poem, like the genuine philosophical poetic life, is always being created anew. We read poems the way we fall in love or we do not read them at all. There is no need to prove or to validate our experience of falling in love. That would be an imposition of categorical thematizing upon experiential thinking. To know the poem is to dwell in the poem and for the poem to dwell in us. How are we to understand this dwelling?

A builder builds a house, but that house is not a *home* for the builder unless the builder *dwells* in the house and creates a home out of it. Similarly, the poet-thinker must learn to dwell in the poem to make it be a poem for him or her. To know *with*

¹⁰ Heidegger, M. "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*; p.98.

¹¹ Maritain, J. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Bollingen Series XXXV-1. New York: Pantheon Books, 1953; ch. 3, "The Preconscious Life of the Intellect." See also, Andrew Tallon, "Connaturality in Aquinas and Rahner," *Philosophy Today*, Spring 1984), pp.139-47.

words in this sense is not to "use" them like tools or equipment, but to dwell in them, to "live" the words so closely that there is no separation, at this point, of the living-word from itself. We cannot have a vital knowledge of this pre-reflective dwelling as long as we refuse to stray from the apparent safety of non-contradictory, logical analysis. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, pre-reflective perception "is a system of thought no less closed than insanity, with this difference that it understands itself and the madman too whereas the madman does not understand it."¹² The "thought" of the person who is insane might be understood as having been entirely overwhelmed by non-Being while the "sane" person mistakenly believes only particularized being to be real. Neither are capable of enduring the full polysemy and ambiguity of the sane/insane. The poet-philosopher alone dwells in the slash between the two, knowing the unspeakable difference and striving to speak it.

To live an authentic life means to dwell in the truth. We know this living truth as but has become a home. With love, there is "something more" than friendship, acquaintance or mere passionate commitment; with a home there is "something more" than the sum of the parts of a house. This elusive yet definitive "something more" is exactly the opening out into the mysterious about which we have been speaking. The mysterious is the primordial *Abgrund* of Being/non-Being. It must be thought of neither as a static absolute demanding that vertical transcendence of the "old" Hegelians nor as a wholly immanent, horizontal transcendence of the "young" Hegelians; neither ontotheology nor promiscuous dissemination. Rather, this fecund nexus of the mythological, pregnant with reversibility, seems consonant with what Merleau-Ponty was striving to express toward the end of his life: "It is a question of that [*logos*] that pronounces itself silently in each sensible thing, inasmuch as it varies around a certain type of message, which we can have an idea of only through our carnal participation in its sense, only by espousing by our body its manner of 'signifying'...."¹³ This generative silence is the unspeakable. It is that which "causes" all beings to come to be while remaining itself equally gripped by non-Being. When Heidegger uses the term Being

¹² Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962, p.23.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis; ed. Claude Lefort. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p.208.

"under erasure" this means that the essence of the word which is crossed out "puts thinking under the claim of a more originary command." ¹⁴ And that which is more originary than Being is the conjunction/distinction of Being/non-Being. There is no possible term that could transparently represent this presencing/non-presencing, this ontological virgule, this chiasm, gap, slash of non-Being becoming Being and back again. But we can live it and we can express/not-express it obliquely in "living" language which is not only a system of signs but, as Merleau-Ponty put it, an "organism of words" as well.¹⁵

5. Conclusion

Robert Bly, a philosophical poet in the tradition of Holderlin, wrote: "For the winter dark of late December there is no solution."¹⁶ For the *Sophist*, too, there is no solution. There is no final answer. This is not an unfortunate failure of Plato's dialectical method; it is its true success. Dialectic always "ends" at the "beginning." The *Sophist* is a dialectical poem, not a puzzle. Neither is there a "solution" for the unspeakable darkness at the center of Being/non-Being. If we come to the *Sophist* looking for solutions, we have already entered wrongly into the circle of Being/non-Being. Being/non-Being is not a puzzle which needs to be figured out, not a problem which needs to be solved. It is not something for which we are awaiting a final, true, absolute analysis. The authentic philosopher-poet is not looking for the final word on Being/non-Being but always for the "first" word. The play of Being/non-Being is more like a game or a dance. When we enter into a game, we do not try to play the perfect game so that we will never need to play the game again. We do not seek the dance that will end all dancing. And so too, when we reach the end of the *Sophist* we find ourselves, once again, back at the beginning.¹⁷

¹⁴ Heidegger, M. *The Question of Being*, trans. W. Kluback and J. T. Wilde. Frankfurt, 1956; London: Vision Press, 1959; pp. 80-81.

¹⁵ For a more complete exposition of language, speech and meaning in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty see my paper "An Organism of Words: Ruminations on the Philosophical Poetics of Merleau-Ponty," *Kinesis* 14, No. 1, 1984.

¹⁶ Bly, R. "Eleven O'Clock at Night" in *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*. New York: Dial Press, 1981.

¹⁷ I am indebted to the late Professor John G. Tich of the Department of Philosophy at Villanova University for his many insightful comments regarding this essay, and for making available to me his extraordinary unpublished work on the *Sophist*.