



# THE PHILOSOPHICAL POETIC ATTITUDE AND PRACTICE OF TRANSFORMATIVE HERMENEUTICS

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## Abstract

*Philosophical poetics is presented in this article as a personally transformative, intuitively oriented, hermeneutical practice of meaning appropriation that is attitudinally geared to the emergent sense of the infinite textual horizon of the text rather than on the analysis of objectively manifest content. It is distinguishable from other hermeneutical practices by its prioritizing of an open and vulnerable attitude on the part of the aspirant reader that is structured by an affective intentionality prior to any scientific, calculative, reductive, propositional, objectivist thinking, and the positivist interpretive attitude associated with that orientation. The practice of this hermeneutical attitude as a way of allowing unsuspected dimensions of the text to reveal themselves is the main subject of this inquiry. Attitude is construed as the positioning of a non-representational intentionality in relation to the infinite interpretive horizon of the text. Following an introduction to the idea of philosophical poetics, the practice is illustrated in an interpretation of Plato's Sophist. My aim is to demonstrate the practice of the phenomenological poetic attitudinal strategy as an interpretive orientation while at the same time showing, as if incidentally, that the Sophist, considered as a literary and philosophical work of art, is a depiction of the necessity for the kind of philosophical poetic practice of transformative reading described herein.*

**Keywords:** Philosophical poetics, Interpretive attitude, Hermeneutical practice, Phenomenology, Literary theory

“The poetic character of thinking is still veiled over.”

Martin Heidegger  
*The Thinker as Poet*

## I. The Philosophical Poetic Attitude

The use of the term philosophical poetics in this essay indicates a meaning that is derived from the ancient, pre-Socratic Greek term *poiēsis*. *Poiēsis* signifies a creative or innovative process of making, as Plato suggests in the *Symposium* (205b), especially the unprecedented bringing into being of something that had never been before (Polkinghorne, 2004). *Poiēsis* might be imagined as the god-like task of an enraptured poet, banned from the Platonic polis for embodying the irrepressible forces of nature erupting in their Heraclitean bonfire and bringing the original into presence, echoing Heidegger's sense of *poiēsis* as “whatever passes over and goes forward into presencing” (VA, III, 11/10), figuratively or literally bringing into being whatever appears, whatever can possibly be perceived and known (Tich, 1982). “Not only handcraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing forth, *poiēsis*,” Heidegger says, but “*physis* also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, *poiēsis*” (VA, III, 11/10). Nature can be thought of as pure *poiētic* making since it brings the new into being out of itself, whereas the craftsman's *poiēsis* brings about the new in something other, like a cup or a shoe. The *poiēsis* of the poet-thinker, in bringing forth or unveiling the poem or interpretation out of herself, comes closer to embodying the naturally occurring *poiēsis* of the ancient Greek perspective, which, nevertheless, remains always “veiled over.”

From the perspective of literary analysis, philosophical poetics can be thought of as a way of exposing a sense of the text through a reading which allows the text to speak on its own terms, requiring the reductive effort of bracketing and putting out of play the exclusive hermeneutical presumption of the rational analytic by adopting the more inclusive phenomenological attitude of presuppositionlessness, as Husserl promoted with the *epochē*, a kind of getting out of the way of the text without severing all the threads of sense-making such that the text can speak on its own through the philosophical poetic interpretation and phenomenological inscription. Rather than systematically analysing and deducing textual meaning from terms reduced to preformatted categories of sense-making, *poiētic*

attunement to reading and writing listens to and resonates with the deeper meaning assemblages of textuality striating the text, exceeding the given text, emerging from between the lines of the text, as it were, allowing the immediate lived experience of this texture to unfold on its own terms into the constitution of my experience of listening or reading and responding without intermediary, representational categories – an experience that can be personally transformative.

After describing the phenomenological poetic practice, I will illustrate it in the interpretation of the *Sophist* presented in Section II. The practice of a philosophical poetic transformative hermeneutic, as an interpretive framework, involves the deployment of a variation of the phenomenological attitude described by Husserl, understood as the posturing of a non-representational intentionality in relation to the infinite horizon of the textuality of the text. Logical analysis commands sense to appear in accord with its pre-defined conceptual terms following the *logos* of a rational dialectic. The poetic approach entails a kind of *pathos* born of a philosophical-poetic desire to see the blossoming of meaning that affectively and attitudinally cajoles, invites, and teases from the text, gripping the aspirant reader more than being grasped. It contributes to an original, creative revelation of the deep, unsuspected textuality of the text that it seeks, if only to be glimpsed obliquely and unexpectedly, as if in passing....

Philosophical poetic hermeneutical research involves a personal activity that is more inclusive of a passive/receptive attitude than the logical-deductive activity of figuring things out. It is less prone to fall back into the misleading comprehension of the natural attitude, a mere *technē* in the form of systematic, categorial thinking. Philosophical poetics is not a matter of applying a formula or following a recipe. Poetic rumination, to borrow Nietzsche's metaphor, moves like a grasshopper with spontaneity and unanticipatableness: now forward, now back, now up, now down, now who knows where, all to the chagrin of the systematisers! To prevent the adventurous, artistically inclined child from colouring outside the lines is like imposing the strictures of logical analysis on the free play of poetic consciousness interacting with the text. To follow the course of the poetic interpretation it will be necessary to adopt an attitude that allows the playfulness of the poetic method to unfold—if an attitude of letting-go and letting-be should be called a “method” at all. What is needed is an attitude of patience, tolerance, openness, playfulness, expectancy, willingness to listen and, perhaps most importantly, *the courage to be transformed by the text*. As Heidegger proposed regarding the interpretation of Plato's *Sophist*, we must put ourselves “into the correct attitude, the correct way of seeing, for an inquiry into beings and their Being” (Heidegger, 2003, pp. 9-10). That “correct way of seeing” is embodied in the *poiētic* syncing of a non-representational, open, and vulnerable orientation to the infinite horizon of the text.

Philosophical poetics is an attitudinally oriented process of free-form, impressionistic in-seeing or insight-oriented thinking, reading, and writing that is led by a responsiveness to the impact of the emergent text. The term “poetic” understood through the lens of *poiēsis* and *aletheia* is a fundamental term signifying the origin of beings that come to be experienceable ‘out of’ the anonymity of Being. Thus, as Heidegger says, poetry is the most authentic form of man's dwelling; it is primal language (Haliburton, 1981, p. 85); it is a measure for all measuring; it is the ground which is itself grounded in the ungrounded—what Heidegger called *Abgrund*. “Heidegger's Being is the groundless play of being,” which is “the inscrutable play of a child,” comments John Caputo (Caputo, 1986, p. 247). The primordial “dwelling” of this “inscrutable play,” as the origin or birth of beings in being named by the poet, is a linguistic orientation to the textuality of life and to the life of the text which, as Merleau-Ponty 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” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 52). From a hermeneutical perspective, the philosophical poetic word is understood here as dialectical in the Platonic sense of following the to-and-fro play of question and answer, and originary in the Hegelian sense, as Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, “in that the linguistic event of the poetic word expresses its own relationship to being” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 427). Like a god or Nature, the generative poetic word is grounded in itself. It is a productive hermeneutical circularity of *pathos* and *logos*, the yin and yang of philosophical poetics.

A philosophical poetic reading is a co-created assemblage of a new world emergent from the text which may transform the life of the aspirant reader, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested. Combining the techniques of structural analysis and phenomenology, especially the hermeneutical phenomenology of Gadamer, Ricoeur argues that we should approach the written text as an atemporal entity which has “distanctiated” itself from its author and from the context in which it was written (Ricoeur, 1978a, p. 213). Every text is thus always available for new interpretations. It is neither a matter of “divining” the mind of the author—which is a questionable task even for the author herself—nor a matter of figuring out the original or ‘correct’ meaning of the text. What can be done is to determine the ‘structure’ of a trace within the text, or ‘behind’ the text, that opens the way to a meaningful and transformative orientation to the subject matter.

The trace of sense inhabiting the text will reveal a possible world opened ‘in front of’ or ‘out of’ the text and will confront the reader with a critique of the world in which she now lives, involving a process of disruption, transformation, and new personal (spiritual) growth in response to the text, a possibility that was well-known and cultivated in the history of *lectio divina* since the second century CE. According to Scriptural hermeneutical theory in the *lectio divina* tradition, it is possible for the open or hermeneutically disposed aspirant reader to incorporate or

assimilate the new world revealed by the sacred text through a process that Ricoeur describes as "appropriation" (*Aneignung*), a process of therapeutic self-transformation through enlightened self-knowledge (Ricoeur, 1981, p.185), which is the explicit goal of *lectio divina* (Duncan, 2011). From the perspective of the hermeneutical tradition of *lectio divina*, philosophical poetics will become a transformative *theo-poetics*, following along in the wake of the theological turn in French phenomenology since Levinas, which goes beyond the scope of the present article, although the development of this dimension of philosophical poetics is anticipated in future works.

In *The Critical Circle* (1982), David Hoy suggests that the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, based on the fundamental epistemological priority of the circular relation of part and whole (reader and text), cannot be a solution to the demand for a more objective and 'scientific' kind of interpretation. "Not a new method or 'approach' to practical interpretation, the hermeneutical theory is more generally a prolegomenon to a *philosophical poetics*" (Hoy, 1982, p.viii, emphasis added). Merleau-Ponty was developing such an approach to a language born of an attitude similar to what motivates philosophical poetics, in that he, following Heidegger, wanted to replace the language of an outmoded causal metaphysics of presence with a phenomenologically purified poetics aimed at speaking the unspeakable (Walsh, 2005). A similar conception can be found in Ricoeur's theory of metaphor in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1978b) and in the work of Harold Bloom, especially his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). But the romantic, idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce makes perhaps the clearest declamation regarding the possibility of a philosophical poetics in *The Defence of Poetry* (1933) where he asserts, in concert with Shelley and Schiller, that "Poetry is philosophy and philosophy is poetry." Croce does not subscribe to this identification entirely but avers that these words do contain "an element of truth" which is that poetry "can be discovered in every individual, in every achievement, and in every action of our life" (Croce, 1933, p. 13). Not everyone agrees, of course. A critique of the possibility of a synergistic relationship between philosophy and poetry can be found in Karsten Harries' article "Meta-Criticism and Meta-Poetry: A Critique of Theoretical Anarchy" (1979).

Although it is not exactly a "theoretical anarchy," philosophical poetics is, above all, an evaluative, relational, and contextual posturing of lived experience in relation to the text. All hermeneutic attitudes reflect a value orientation. The unconcealment of truth (Heidegger's *aletheia*) in the philosophical poetic approach, emerges, not from syllogistic cogitations, but through a synergistic interaction between reader and text motivated by an apophantic movement of longing or metaphysical desire for the emergence of that truth. Thus, as Heidegger pointed out, it is a matter of entering the right way into and *living* this practice rather than presumptuously grasping it and thinking it can be comprehended objectively without personal or subjective consequences. The aspiring philosophical poetic reader must experience the world revealed by the text immanently and bodily as a kind of transformative trauma of wonder. She must be vulnerable to being changed by the experience. This perspective of philosophical poetics follows Pierre Hadot's critical distinction between philosophy approached as a way of life, as Hadot claims it was in antiquity, and philosophy approached as a discourse, as it became after the intellectual development of Christianity beginning in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (Hadot, 1995, p. 269).

The lived openness of the philosophical poetic *attitude* pertains to the whole person as a social and communal being, as opposed to the private, secluded process of abstract, theoretical reasoning alone, characterized by a disposition of willingness to be changed by the as yet unknown truth revealed through contact with the flesh of the text—a disposition found equally in the poetic word itself, an exemplar of which might be Augustine of Hippo's well-known life-transformative theo-poetic experience in relation to a text from Scripture that he was moved to pick up and read in response to another text that he heard as if from a child calling to him to "Take up and read!" as recorded in his *Confessions* (Augustine of Hippo, 2014, pp. 28-29). There is a synergistic hermeneutical circle operating between the transformations of the text and the attitude of the reader, bringing these transformations about to some extent, a reader who is in turn transformed by the very text being thus re-constituted. Philosophical poetics can therefore be seen to have a therapeutic (*therapeia*) element insofar as it involves a commitment of trust and a personal risk in the hope of obtaining an increase of self-understanding and spiritual growth and development through a purifying exposure of oneself to the new world revealed by the text without resorting to a "purification by shaming" of the reader (Candiotta, 2018).

Philosophical-poetics is opposed to all dogmatism while recognizing what Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty point to as the necessary prejudice of human facticity or historical/bodily being-in-the-world. Philosophical poetics does not attempt to achieve final, apodictic answers or solutions to philosophical problems. Rather, in the manner of traditional phenomenology, it is a way of generating new and more insightful and meaningful questions and perspectives within the ever-renewable philosophical tradition of ageless questioning and questioning anew. The willingness to engage this fine but risky philosophical poetic process of reading and writing is motivated by a teleological premonition or call emanating from an ultimate mystery, 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 poetically the infinite presence/absence of this unspeakable mystery, to speak it ever anew.

Keeping in mind these various perspectives regarding the possibility of a personally transformative hermeneutical philosophical poetics, the tangential reading of the *Sophist* presented below is an attempt to utilize,

demonstrate, and further develop this methodological orientation, while at the same time showing, as I said above, that Plato's *Sophist*, as a literary and philosophical work, is itself a demonstration of the necessity for the philosophical poetic attitudinal approach to hermeneutics to be an integral dimension of both phenomenological research and research in the literary arts.

## II. A Philosophical Poetic Approach to Plato's *Sophist*

The later dialogues of Plato, especially the *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*, present difficulties to an exclusively rational interpretation because of the apparent failure of the dialectical method to achieve positive, unequivocal solutions to the various philosophical issues discussed in these works—as if Plato's dialogues were puzzles to be figured out or problems to be solved, as if the question of Being had a solution (Heidegger, 1992/2003, p. 133). To the contrary, in *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue* (1975) John Sallis suggests that the *logical* presuppositions inherent in our own "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 would preclude the appropriation of what Sallis calls the deeper and more meaningful "relevant bindingness" of the dialogues. 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?" What Sallis means by the "relevant bindingness" or compelling grip on the reader that the Platonic dialogues might have "is of a different order" than the rational *logoi* of dialectic as typically assessed. "Is the relevant bindingness," Sallis wonders, "perhaps such as can least of all be measured by something like a 'logical' refutation?" (Sallis, 1975, p. 484).

By the time one arrives at the end of the *Sophist* it ought to be clear that nothing can be discussed in isolation. A return to the beginning of the dialogue confirms that this contention had been indicated early on. 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 but unanswerable question posed at the outset of the dialogue concerning the nature of philosophy itself and the kind of thinking that is proper to the philosophical enterprise—elemental themes that are inviting to a philosophical poetic approach and personally meaningful to me, which is a prerequisite of the philosophical poetic interpretive approach. To explore the call of those meaning layers of the *Sophist* from a philosophical poetic attitude, therefore, and to see why it concerns itself with the identity of the sophist and the relationship Being/non-Being, it is necessary to begin by considering that more fundamental question about the nature of the philosopher and philosophical thinking 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 easily overlooked as interpreters rush headlong into the disputation which follows. Yet, from a philosophical poetic perspective, it is exactly in the context of the dialogical opening generated by 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, whose name, not coincidentally, means "a gift from God." Theodorus has brought with him a friend, the Stranger from Elea who is himself a kind of unexpected gift. This meeting of friends at the outset of the dialogue should be thought of as neither an incidental literary device nor an historical or political gathering connected to Socrates' legal predicament. Instead, it is a gathering which creates a deeper ontological and necessarily social clearing from within which the aesthetics and philosophical vectors of the dialogue will operate and without which it would contract into a mere treatise.

The first comment from the character of Socrates in the dialogue after the Stranger has been introduced confirms that 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). One is immediately struck by the outlandishness of that 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 and boldness 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 mankind," (*Sophist*, 216 b). But why is the god who marks the orderly and the lawless doings of men specifically connected with the Stranger?

There is something peculiar about the Stranger from Elea. It is not without purpose that Plato has refrained from giving him a name. That anonymity cannot be adequately explained as a shield behind which Plato is cowering against real or imagined political reprisal. Although there may be some truth to such a 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. Who is the Stranger? 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, presence and absence in the flesh. The Stranger 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 Levinas points out, the locus of the stranger is the infinite "conjunction/disjunction" of the same and the other in the process of which it is "the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself (*le chez soi*)" (Levinas, 1979, p. 39). The stranger represents the darkness without which there could be no light, but in whose light my sovereign identity is challenged. What kind of illumination can this nameless Stranger shed on the prospect of genuine philosophical discourse?

We learn from the dialogue that the Stranger is above mere disputative argumentation: "...he is more reasonable than the devotees of verbal dispute," Plato says (*Sophist*, 216 b). Verbal dispute is superficial. It relies on rhetoric to persuade. It does not see behind the immediate appearance of the word that "saying" which comes from 'behind' and 'before' the word. The reason of verbal dispute belongs to the non-contradictory logic of identity—a bloodless logic (skilfully 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 from Plato's point of view. The authentic philosopher deals in a kind of reason that goes beyond the earthbound rationality of a dialectical *logos*. It goes straight to the heart of the matter. This 'higher' reason deals with the mysterious, the transcendent, the true, the beautiful ... and the divine. Divine reasoning, what I think of as "phenomenological poetic thinking"—differentiated by Plato from mere verbal dispute—is what marks the measure of the authentic philosopher from the non-authentic.

But how are we to know this fundamental distinction between the authentic and the non-authentic, between philosophical 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).

From a philosophical-poetic perspective, the entire movement of the dialogue that follows can be understood as an unravelling of the significance of this statement, unmasking the shapes and guises that both conceal and reveal the genuine philosopher.

The interrogation of the notion "Being/non-Being" in the *Sophist* is situated within the ambiguous context of philosophical inquiry and interpretation 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 seems to be talking about reflects what he would have thought it means to live an authentic philosophical life—the goal of a transformative hermeneutics. 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, with Derrida, who defers this difference as *différance*), the truly strange—as original—to himself, perhaps, as well as to others. Sometimes the genuine philosopher will appear to be "of no account," as Plato says, that is, unable to give an accounting of himself that makes sense in terms of the logic of conventional worldly accountability. At other times, however, the genuine philosopher will be perceived as being "above all worth," the saint, the hero, the virtuous person, perhaps the head of a great religion or a reformer. The genuine philosopher is a person who necessarily wears "guises," who lives in concealment from those who do not have the eyes to see or ears to hear. It is questionable at this point in the dialogue whether it will be possible to determine who is and who is not a genuine philosopher clearly and distinctly. What does seem clear, however, is that it is the existential, human context of this question and its connection to a divinely grounded, obliquely revealed *logos*, as revealed in the repetitious event of Being/non-Being's conjunction/disjunction that is the focus of Plato's interest.

Plato is not concerned with abstract verbal dispute for its own sake. He is concerned with the affairs of gods and men. Aptly, therefore, 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 in anticipation of the soul's life after death. 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 and telos of human life. It is from this perspective alone that we can understand Socrates' mysterious description of the genuine philosopher in the dialogue. And if the subject of the dialogue later focuses on determining the nature of the relationship between philosophers and sophists and between Being and non-Being, it must be seen, through a philosophical poetic lens, not as an historicist end in-itself, but as a means of shedding light on the nature and practice of living a genuine philosophical life.

The question of the predication of the term "sophist" is raised by Socrates in the dialogue because the genuine philosopher living a philosophical life 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, Socrates clearly intends pejorative connotations—they are simulacra, false depictions 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'. Conventional consciousness cannot see the true philosopher qua philosopher but only as "something less" than that, as something within the range of their own conventional vision. That is, they can only *misperceive* the true philosopher. 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 way 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. That is the basis for Socrates' threefold question concerning the way 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 to those who can see him no other way. It is exactly that "something divine" which both reveals and conceals the genuine philosopher. He is simultaneously god-like in his infinite unmanifestness, and a sophist, statesman, madman, or whatever, in his manifest appearance to others of lesser vision. Thus, while the genuine philosopher is the locus or clearing where Being is made manifest or shows itself, he is also the place where non-Being is made manifest precisely in its concealment, absence, or unmanifestness, revealing the essential ambiguity of both the stranger and the text.

Obviously, there is a contradiction in the idea of the presence of an absence: how is it possible to both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect? The logic of identity is stifled by the paradox. The poetic philosopher coming to this apparent *aporia* blocking the interpretive path would not attempt to solve or resolve it as a logically rendered contradiction, but to penetrate its impossibility meditatively, as if approaching a Zen *koan*, dwelling in its paradoxicality, experiencing the possibility of this impossibility on the hither side of *logos*, as Nietzsche taught, as it is generated and revealed in and through and by the infinite horizon of the text. It is not a matter of dialectically passing beyond the Hegelian notion of understanding (*Verstand*) to Thought or Reason itself (*Vernunft*) as *Wissenschaft*, but of *dwelling* unconditionally in the dynamic gap of 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 an idealist "yearning" in Socrates and Plato, according to Heidegger (2003), that is manifest/unmanifested in the person of the genuine philosopher, will always be misunderstood by those who attempt to methodically separate these inseparable conjuncts to grasp them with a mathematical, scientific, or objectivist 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 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; that is, by *entering into it* in the "right" way, with the proper attitude, as Heidegger, Gadamer, and others have suggested. As I mentioned above, this lived, transformative dimension of reading was long recognized and recommended in the *lectio divina* tradition where targeted, transformative reading, interpretation, and exegesis of sacred texts was practiced routinely, using various methodological techniques, from antiquity, a hermeneutical poetic practice in which the same text was thought to differentiate along with changes in the reader's spiritual development (Duncan, 2011). And, beyond Scriptural hermeneutics, perhaps it will become clear that there is a sacred dimension to all interactions of the phenomenologically reduced consciousness of philosophical poetics with the play of textuality and the poetic word, a tangential but intriguing notion that exceeds the more modest scope of the present article.

The philosophical poetic attitude is motivated by a longing on the part of the aspiring hermeneut that is like the Aristotelian importance of wonder as the cutting edge of philosophical thinking, a longing for understanding and enlightenment, a longing to 'see' what is happening, a longing that opens out toward the *Abgrund* of Being/non-Being and seeks its fulfilment in relationship with that 'divine' text. A conversion of the heart, a metanoia prompted by an inexplicable longing for the enlightenment of true knowledge is the entrance way into genuine philosophy from a Platonic perspective. 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 that 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*, 265d). Theaetetus is here involved in an existential struggle through which all aspirants must pass who desire to live the philosophical life. Earlier in the dialogue, while speaking about the intractability of rationalists or 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. Not so much a change of mind, but a change of *heart*—a movement not of *logos* but of *pathos*. 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).

It is not a logical argument that brings about the metanoia and new conviction of Theaetetus regarding the divine origin of things. It is the passionate commitment to an objective uncertainty (to borrow a phrase and perspective from Kierkegaard) that he 'sees' with his heart in the face of the Stranger. The dialogue could not have proceeded if Theaetetus had not had or made this conversion. For if Theaetetus would not have been willing to make himself vulnerable and willing to risk openness to the divine text of the Stranger 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 things would have had to become paramount. But Plato depicts Theaetetus making a leap of faith before the text of the Stranger and surrendering to the fine risk of being forever transformed by its therapeutic power.

From a philosophical poetic perspective, it might be more fruitful to approach the *Sophist* as a dialectical or narrative poem rather than a discursive, metaphysical treatise. It is certainly a work of art in what might be called the dialogue genre of 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens. Plato himself lends credence to such an interpretation, first, by virtue of his use of a dramatic, 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, it is its *poetic* element understood as the blossoming of *poiēsis*, a divine-like crafting anew of the possible out of the impossible, like the requisite perpetual beginning anew found in Husserl's traditional phenomenology. The irrepressibility yet ineffability of the divine—that which is 'present' precisely in the conspicuousness of its absence, like the Eleatic Stranger—is the basic motive power of the dialogue. Its *pathos* longs to speak the unspeakable. The recognition of that necessary and inextricable connection of what is said to what is unsaid, and of what is unsaid to what is unsayable in reductive, discursive language, situates the *Sophist* in the realm of the poetic and necessitates a philosophical-poetic approach for its fullest interpretive rendering.

And yet, philosophy as a *logos*, and poetics as a *pathos*, may not be that far apart in terms of their ultimate destination. "To be a great poet is to be a great thinker," Heidegger claims. Yet, he adds that "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" (Heidegger, 1971, p.12). Commenting on that passage, Caputo explains that: "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' (*das denken Dichten*)..." (Caputo, 1978, p. 235). Philosophical poetic thinking is primarily a lived practice and thus will never be fully grasped reflectively or objectively, but only in its execution. It will never become a comprehended, defined object of scientific scrutiny. The life of the poet-philosopher is itself a poem never finished—as no genuine poem is ever finished from the perspective that it is the act of reading that re-creates or brings the text into existence ever anew out of the mysterious gift of the inaccessible given. That kind of originary, philosophical poetic reading and writing is not easy to accomplish as a life practice. It is perhaps akin to learning to play the cello, just as the phenomenological attitude of presuppositionlessness aimed at by Husserl's *epochē* cannot be accomplished in the Cartesian blink of an eye. "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 extreme discord and so to establish their concord?" (Heidegger, 1971a, p. 98). The reverberation of this question brings us back to the paradoxical movement toward speaking the unspeakable in the *Sophist*.

Considered logically, speaking the unspeakable is impossible, contradictory, and meaningless. To approach this "task," formal logic must be superseded in favour of an organic, pre-reflective, or poetic "logic" in the form of an inquiring *pathos* that gropes and feels its way along. Thus, the Stranger from Elea is ironically 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 and the metaphysics of presence allows an opening for a pre-reflective, bodily 'knowledge' which is essentially affective, sensual, and experiential. Its communication is both immediate and indefinite. It is not the verbal transferring of a defined and definite object from one consciousness to another, but the invitation to the fine risk of communion, to an immediate experience of birthing the unique poetic creation as a living organism, what the Scholastics, from a different perspective, called "connaturality" (Maritain, 1953). The question of scientific

validity does not exist at this level of knowing since that is proper only to logical, scientific, referential reflection. Pre-reflective 'knowing' is non-transferable as such, although it may be communicable in practice. It is an on-the-job, handyman kind of knowing that is more in the hands and in the body than in the rational mind. An authentic poem is never the same poem for any two readers who read it, since every reading, for better or worse, is a re-authoring of the text. How, then, can we ever say that we know "the" meaning of the poem? From the phenomenological perspectivism of philosophical-poetics, 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 a meaningfulness that is always being created anew like seasons changing. We can read a poem the way we fall in love, incorporating it by memorizing it as a way of symbolically and ritually interrelating with it in real time. 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 knowing. To know the poem is to dwell in the poem and for the poem to dwell in you. How are we to understand this in-dwelling of the poetic word?

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 poetic text to make it be a poem for him or her, to create a home, a dwelling, out of the house of the text. To know *with* words in this sense is not to "use" them like tools or equipment, but to dwell in them and thus to "live" the words so closely that there could be no separation of the lived and living word from itself. We cannot have a vital knowledge of this pre-reflective dwelling if we refuse to stray from the apparent safety of a non-contradictory, logical analysis of the text. 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" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 23). The 'thinking' 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 beings to be real. Neither can endure the full polysemy and ambiguity of dwelling in the virgule of the sane/insane, Being/non-Being, said/unsaid. The phenomenological task of the poet philosopher is to dwell productively in the chiasm or slash between the two, 'knowing' the unspeakable difference as a *pathos* of longing driving the poet-philosopher to say it in an always inadequate *logos*.

To live a philosophical poetic life would be to desire to dwell in the truth of enlightenment. We know this living truth not as the house of being but as its 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. That elusive yet crucial "something more" is an opening and invitation into the mysterious presence/absence of the Unspeakable, the Good beyond Being/non-Being. Such an unsolvable and poetic mystery is the primordial *Abgrund* of Being/non-Being, which is the poetic. It should be thought of as neither a static absolute demanding the vertical transcendence of the "old" Hegelians nor as the wholly immanent, horizontal transcendence of the "young" Hegelians; neither ontotheology nor promiscuous dissemination. Rather, this fecund nexus of the mytho-logical that I call philosophical-poetics, pregnant with reversibility, seems consonant with what Merleau-Ponty was striving to express toward the end of his life when he wrote: "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'..." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.208). This generative silence would proclaim the epiphany of 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' under erasure, ~~Being~~, he means that the essence of the word that is crossed out "puts thinking under the claim of a more originary command" (Heidegger, 1959, pp.80-81). And that which is more originary than Being is the undeconstructible conjunction/distinction of Being/non-Being, what I muse upon as the Unspeakable. There is no possible term that could transparently and distinctly represent this presencing/non-presencing, this ontological virgule, 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 a suggestive philosophical poetic or 'living' language which is not only a system of signs but, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, a living "organism of words" as well, an organism with a heart.

### III. Conclusion

Robert Bly, a philosophical poet in the tradition of Holderlin, wrote: "For the winter dark of late December there is no solution" (Bly, 1981). For the *Sophist*, too, there is no solution to the question of Being/non-Being, no final answer. This is not an unfortunate failure of Plato's dialectical method; it is its true success, keeping open that for which closure in com-prehension would be anathema. Philosophical poetic dialectic always "ends" at the "beginning again." The *Sophist* is a dialectical poem, not a puzzle to be figured out. It is a beautiful maze to be walked through and wondered at. Neither is there a "solution" for the unspeakable darkness, the abyss of infinity at the heart of Being/non-Being. If we come to the *Sophist* looking for final solutions, we have already entered wrongly into the hermeneutical circle of Being/non-Being. Being/non-Being is neither a puzzle that needs to be deciphered nor a problem that needs to be solved. It is not something for which we are awaiting an absolutely final

answer once and for all. The authentic philosopher poet is not looking for the final word on the fecund conjunction of Being/non-Being, but always again for the 'first' word.

Perhaps the play of Being/non-Being is more like a game or a dance than a puzzle, more like a child playing a game of dice. When we enter 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 perfect dance to end all dancing. And so, too, when we reach the end of the *Sophist*, we find ourselves, once again, back at the beginning.

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