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The Sophistic *Esprit Français*: Sophistry and Elite French Humanistic Education

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Abstract: This essay examines the role of sophistic practices in elite French humanistic education, specifically “omniloquacity”, the ability to speak about any given subject. Drawing together intellectual history, cross-cultural comparisons, and educational testimonies, the essay elaborates a “pedagogical” version of sophistry in this French context that differs from more traditional “vocational” sophistries. Although I focus on the mid-twentieth century, I also consider earlier upheavals and Jesuit influences that shaped an agonistic culture of sophistic performances, challenging competitions, and ultimately, a certain *esprit français* associated with elite humanistic education. The history of rhetoric in France does not end with the demise of the rhetoric class in 1902, and takes on new meanings when considering the sophistic practices that outlived its nominal death.

Keywords: sophists; rhetoric; education; French thought; Jesuits; *l’esprit français*, sociology of intellectuals

Why do anything, I say, unless it may lead to a place in the royal home (regia) of eloquence? Your fatherland (patria) will praise your ardent desire for this outstanding honor. ... Eloquence will, moreover, admit its candidates, and reward them handsomely. —Joseph de Jouvancy, S.J., *Candidatus rhetoricae* [1710] (Jouvancy 2020, p. 58)¹

1. Introduction

Between the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries, writers in France found countless and sometimes unpredictable uses for the word *sophiste*, both pejorative and otherwise. Although one might use the term to criticize a contemporary rival or relegate the “first corrupters of eloquence” to an ancient past (Amar du Rivier 1811, p. 118), the word *sophiste* could also serve as a banner for one’s philosophical colleagues (Dumensil 1912) or an excuse to drolly implicate oneself, as Roland Barthes does, in the business of showing off one’s intellectual merchandise (like the shoemaker of Aristotle’s *Sophistical Refutations*).² Moreover, commentators inside and outside France pulled *l’esprit français*³—the mental or intellectual disposition of the French nation—into the semantic orbit of sophistry by associating the French mind with verbal agonism, the priority of words over things, *epideixis*, rhetorical virtuosity (put favourably) or verbalism (less favourably), and the power to expound on any given subject, no matter how difficult or obscure. This ability to write and speak on all subjects (de omni re scibili, “of all things knowable”),⁴ which I term “omniloquacity”, presents a more recent case of a talent once ascribed to the ancient sophist Gorgias, with his daring *skhedioi logoi* (improvised speeches) that could address anything his audience could “throw” him (*proballeté*) (Philostr. VS 1.praef, Gorg. 447c, Meno 70c).⁵



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Omniloquacity will be a focal point, in this discussion, in a larger array of concerns about a certain sophistic temperament of France and the question of its origins.

These diverse concerns, over the past two centuries, sprang up from numerous sources—educational thinkers and reformers inside and outside France, cultural commentators in the Anglophone and Germanophone worlds, sociologists interested in pedagogy, travel writers trading in stereotypes, and sundry intellectuals. For instance, Ernest Renan, an educational critic in addition to his more famous studies of religion and philology, worried that his “nation of speakers and writers” had become too eloquent for its own good, numb to the *fond des choses*—the content, basis, or bottom of things (Renan 1868, p. 94). Reasons for caution abound, however, when speaking of French sophists and especially of national intellectual archetypes or stereotypes bound up with sophistry. Some Anglophone commentators have located sophistry (or its fellow travellers) in specific bodies of French thought, which can be difficult when one lacks a stable ancient reference point, especially one without pejorative baggage; the inquiry into Greek sophists has indeed “verged on esoterism” (de Romilly 1992, p. xi) amid philological and philosophical gaps and quandaries that thwart scholarly consensus about the identity and practice of the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman sophists. Moreover, moving beyond the close readings of sophistic texts to consider the realm of national culture, broad stereotypes derived from the characteristics of an elite minority remain contentious at best. Until the late nineteenth century, most women, peasants, working poor, and the rural *patoisants* who barely spoke French—in other words, a demographic and geographic majority of the nation—had such meager educational opportunities⁶ that a sophistic career would be out of the question. All of this complicates the idea of a French sophistic *esprit* from the outset.

Facing such challenges, this essay avoids philosophical exegesis and instead examines educational practices, institutions, and literature almost unknown in Anglophone studies of French thought.⁷ Just as the ancient Greek sophists can be described as an educational movement and indeed a “pedagogical revolution” (Marrou 1964, p. 76), French intellectuals we might associate with sophistry up to the era of Jacques Derrida almost invariably received an elite⁸ formal education that often qualified them to become educators. The total set of possible educational trajectories remains complex; instead of describing all the pathways an aspiring humanist might take, this essay focuses on the most challenging and prestigious one, the “royal road” (*voie royale*) for aspiring humanists, and its competitive examinations (*concours*) that select a fixed number of students for advancement and reject the rest. Studying the logic, objectives, and practices that one finds along the royal road yields new ways of thinking about sophistry as a pedagogical *habitus* formed in specific agonistic circumstances. Part of these sophistic dispositions would seem to be *mētis*—the “cunning intelligence” that had once endowed Greek sophists with multiple speeches resembling “the supple arms of the octopus” (Detienne and Vernant 1991, p. 39). After many commentators have identified sophistry (or rhetorical sophistication) within “French thought” itself, or have vaguely characterized it as “cultural”, this discussion intervenes to more specifically enumerate the pre-existing and built-in sophistic mechanisms of the *voie royale*, specifically those of the most challenging *concours*. In other words, this essay shifts attention away from a sophistic product to a process and from sophistic doctrines held by specific thinkers to a broader system of institutions with built-in sophistic practices, especially omniloquacity. If the sophistic *esprit français* is to be located anywhere specific, it is within the agonistic architecture of fateful educational junctures during the life of a young humanist. This more transitory and subtle “pedagogic” sophistry will be later contrasted with a more stable and conventional “vocational” sophistry.

2. Educational Contexts and the “Death” of Rhetoric

I will be highlighting the royal road’s sophistic practices during the first half of the twentieth century—a period that ironically follows the purported “death” or “execution” of the art of rhetoric in France between 1880 and 1902 (Compagnon 1986, p. 158). These de facto sophistic practices, especially omniloquacity, reveal a subterranean legacy of pedagogic performances often imperfectly described as “rhetorical.” The need for such sophistic practices remains at odds with the de jure doctrines of Gustave Lanson and other pedagogical ideologists of the Third Republic (1870–1940), for whom rhetoric represented “the unfortunate habit of not examining the truth of things” (Lanson 1902, p. 102). The end of the great *classe de rhétorique* in 1902 symbolized, among other intellectual and political upheavals, an ostensive end to the pedagogic priority of eloquence during the nadir of rhetoric’s reputation. As we will see, however, ample testimonies and sociological critiques reveal that key rhetorical arts had not died but gone underground, partly transforming into a habitus that formed around intense competitions and persisted beyond them. Crucial here, as with Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of the term, is that the “transposable dispositions” making up the habitus⁹ are “adapted to their outcomes” yet do not necessarily “presuppos[e] a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). This accidental or emergent sophistry in rhetoric’s officially “post-mortem” period had lost some of its explicit precepts, yet survived—or arguably, thrived—within the trials of elite humanistic education, which still so often prized “rhetorical . . . [and] formal qualities” (Aron 1983, p. 445) and which often decided one’s educational and professional fate.

Lacking an equivalent in the Anglophone world, the idiosyncratic journey leading to the École Normale Supérieure on Rue d’Ulm (henceforth ENS or the École Normale, which obtains its name from teaching “norms”), will not be intuitive for many readers. The journey and its end point—a kind of “teaching college” not nearly as instrumental as the North American “teacher’s college”—does not resemble a “high school to PhD” trajectory:

The <i>Voie Royale</i>	
<i>lycée</i> (6 years)	
Exam: baccalaureate	Travelers
<i>khâgne</i> (3 years, sometimes 1–2)	Jacques Derrida, Simone Weil, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Aron, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Bergson, Jacques Rancière, Jean Hyppolite
Exam: <i>concours d’entrée</i>	
ENS (3 years)	
Exam: <i>agrégation de philosophie</i>	

This *voie royale*, so conspicuously prestigious that other pathways “can only be defined in terms of lack” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p. 170, note 15), presents a structurally and functionally distinct path from the standard French university system. Whereas the Sorbonne “trains scholars”, the ENS, as one graduate put it, represents *une Sorbonne à tout faire*: a Sorbonne for any and all purposes, ultimately populating a range of discursive and creative disciplines with its *normaliens* (Téry 1994, p. 132). The *voie royale* takes the young man (or woman, beginning in the 1920s) through a (typically prestigious) *lycée*, to intense studies in a *khâgne* (1–3 preparatory years for the ENS, but physically situated in a *lycée*), then through the extraordinarily demanding *concours d’entrée* to the ENS, and finally, to the ENS itself (letters division), whose named purpose is the training of *lycée* teachers, and which offers a relatively freer and easier experience.¹⁰ This is followed by a prestigious teaching qualification, the *agrégation*, in a specific discipline (*philosophie, histoire, lettres*). The

intense gravity, difficulty, and importance of the *khâgne* years in the formation and selection of French intellectuals may be counterintuitive for Anglophone readers, but it is here that one must be particularly attentive to sophistic practices, and more generally, to the skills, dispositions, and areas of knowledge that already distinguish French intellectuals before the age of twenty.

3. Vocational and Pedagogical Sophistries

From the texts and contexts under consideration in this essay, one can derive two conceptions of French sophistry, which I call the vocational and the pedagogical (with care, they could be generalized beyond France). The terms imply a continuum rather than a binary. The vocational view, which I develop based on the testimony of the influential teacher Jean Guéhenno (1890–1978), tends to classify people by their occupational and ethical tendencies: there are *maîtres du logos* (teachers or masters of *logos*), of which sophists are a nefarious subcategory. It takes after Plato and other classical sources. Considered in isolation, however, the vocational view elides the deep insinuation of sophistry into the workings and purposes of modern humanistic educational institutions, not just the moral and behavioural makeup of individuals. In response, the pedagogical view highlights a sophistic *habitus* adapted to the total competitive system of training, testing, procedures, regulations, distinctions, venues, skills, and values. According to this view, any thinker can find a natural advantage in sophistic tactics while facing the exigence of a fateful competition (the *concours d'entrée* being the most decisive struggle) and may retain an intellectual imprint from these agonistic trials and the grueling training that led them there.

Whereas the vocational view of sophistry casts a philosophical net in the animal-hunting style of Plato's *Sophist*, the pedagogical view moves toward a thick description of an educational ecosystem that fosters sophistic survival strategies. Indebted to a more sociological and anthropological perspective, the pedagogic view absorbs a variety of testimonial documents from students and teachers, as well as the work of historians such as Jean-François Sirinelli, who details the crucial and idiosyncratic "*khâgne* archipelago" that prepares students for the École Normale Supérieure and was in fact built in response in the exigence of its formidable *concours d'entrée*. This essay cannot begin to do justice to the quantitative surveys Sirinelli amassed on the geographic and social class origins of *khâgneux* (Sirinelli 1988), nor to Pierre Bourdieu's related polemics about the formation of intellectual elites in France, nor to the ongoing discourses on democratizing education.¹¹ What this essay seeks to accomplish is shedding light on a matrix of competitive exigencies along the old *voie royale* that reveal the persistence and production of the sophistic legacy in France in the twentieth century. Moreover, this essay argues that sophistry is less of an individual "calling" (as in the Latin root of *vocation*) or profession and more of an intrinsic institutional feature that rubs off, as it were, on students. Although teachers certainly play a role in this inculcation of sophistry, one must also understand the greater institutional forces that bind those teachers and shaped them as students. One might approach these forces by sketching out the policies, practices, curricula, and objectives that form sophistic ecosystems of sorts, from training in omniloquacity to the pageantry of prize-giving (*la distribution solennelle des prix*), and their origins (or codification) in the Jesuits and other late Renaissance or early modern educators.

No modern teacher was more famous than Alain, the *nom de plume* of Émile Chartier (1868–1951), whom Marcel Mauss regarded as a *sophiste* in a neutral sense (Aron 1983, p. 73). Alain, as Raymond Aron reports, "denied sociology to expound [*disserter*], in his own manner, upon public affairs" (p. 73), becoming a reasonably serious "moralist and writer on ideas" but also a victim of his philosophical "syncretism" (p. 74). Alain exerted a significant influence on many students, including Simone Weil, who was among the

first women permitted to become a *khâgneuse* (a post-*lycée* aspirant to the ENS). Insofar as this “man of the agora” inspired and held sway over his “disciples” (Sirinelli 1995, p. 68), he recalls the world of Socrates and the sophists. But the discourse surrounding Alain—steeped in *doxa*, disagreement, and flattering tributes mingled with rumours of corrupting the youth—suggests that we must be cautious: creating taxonomies based on polysemic, pejorative terms such as “sophist” is a risky affair. This essay therefore strives, whenever possible, to refer to sophistic practices rather than persons. Jean Guéhenno’s apt expression, “master of logos” (*maître du logos*), provides a fresh start for discussing the various teachers of *logos*-based arts.

Sophiste is indeed a loaded term, especially in a political context. Whereas witnesses of and commentators on sophistic educational practices span the French political spectrum, the reform and defense of classical (i.e., rhetorical) education in France clustered into encampments during the Third Republic. Since rhetorical culture and teaching could appear “selective and elitist [*élitaires*]”, in other words, “antidemocratic and inegalitarian” (Compagnon 1986, p. 163), advocates for the art of rhetoric before its apparent demise, such as Ferdinand Brunetière, tended toward conservatism. The factions to his left who sought to replace rhetoric with their new science of literary history failed to eliminate some of the deeper institutional structures and values that fostered sophistic practices in secondary and higher education. Apologies for rhetoric eventually emanated from a wide political span, from Brunetière on the right to Barthes, half a century later, on the left, a remarkable reorientation of rhetoric’s patronage and a sign, perhaps, of its latent potency and broad reach in French intellectual culture.¹²

4. Sophistic Stereotypes and *L’esprit Français*

Stereotypes of French sophistry and the broader characteristics of a national *esprit* open up a variety of historical and comparative reference points. Faced with Barthes’s observation that the French have a “visible taste . . . for the (verbal) *agôn*: [they are] heirs of the Greeks, without their genius” (Barthes 2005, p. 127), one might be inclined to go all the way back to Protagoras, who, according to Diogenes Laërtius, initiated the *logon agônes*—debates or speech contests (Diog. Laert. 9.8.52). It will be easier here, however, to pursue a comparative approach that treats French sophistry as a relative quality with respect to other nations. Across the Rhine, Germany presented a particularly powerful and frequent point of contrast.

Georg W. F. Hegel discerned a certain intellectual modernity in ancient sophistry well before Friedrich Nietzsche’s more famous parallels (MacDonald 2006, p. 23). Referring to the idea of the sophist as someone who produces a clever speaker (*epistatên tou poiêsai deinon legein* [Protagoras 312d5]) and can “turn subjects around in many directions to consider them”, Hegel observes: “The French are, in this way, good speakers; we call their talking blabber [*Schwatzen*]. One learns the language to speak good French—that means, however, acquiring French *Bildung*.” Indeed, Hegel continues, a command of the language without *Bildung* (education, formation) entails poor speech, and it is through this *Bildung* that one gains “manifold points of view” and ultimately a “wealth of categories” for considering a given subject (Hegel 1986, p. 413). This, for Hegel, constitutes a happier feature of sophistry, French or Greek.

These quasi-sophistic stereotypes of French intellectuals tend to produce analogies: Germany is to philosophy (or metaphysics, or science, or things) what France is to literature (or eloquence, or rhetoric, or words). Such analogies can imply apparently neutral evaluations—perhaps the French and Germans had “opposite” intellectual defects (Faguet 1910, p. 301)—or grandiose, even reckless, distillations of a national essence. For example, Henri-Frédéric Amiel peppered the 16,840 pages of his *Journal Intime* with judgements

about the psychological character of France (one study is aptly titled *Henri-Frédéric Amiel, juge de l'esprit français*). Whether Amiel foregrounds the national contrasts (“Germany will teach the French that rhetoric is not science”, he writes after Prussia defeats France) or simply implies them (“France proceeds by bursts of eloquence, of cannonading, or of law-making: she thinks that so she can change the nature of things, and she produces only phrases and ruins”), his *l'esprit français* emerges as a phantom realm of verbiage that floats about in the noumenal world (Amiel 1921, pp. 182, 202–3). “A people of appearances and veneers”, the French and “their religion [of] words” (Amiel 1985, p. 313) vainly strive, for Amiel,¹³ toward a kind of sophistry reminiscent of the “logology” articulated by Barbara Cassin, in which “being is an effect of saying” (Cassin 1995, p. 73). Variations on Amiel’s theme have been put in much more sober terms. Ernst Robert Curtius, for instance, documented a French *Kultur* deeply rooted in its literature rather than mere verbalism. In his *Die Französische Kultur* (1931), the analogy becomes, “In Germany intellectual culture [*geistige Kultur*] may be philosophical, yet in France it can only be literary”, and indeed here, “whoever has not mastered [*beherrscht*] the spoken or written word cannot exert any influence whatsoever in public life” (Curtius 1975, p. 75).¹⁴ Both the flippant and serious temperamental stereotypes of nations can be interpreted through a comparative sociology or ethnography of intellectuals, for which Franco-Germanic impressions have been prototypical (Ringer 1992; Florack 2000; Hörner 2004).

5. Pedagogical Contexts and the Jesuit Legacy

Expansive intellectual developments in the nineteenth century introduced the possibility of viewing these stereotypes as something other than a kaleidoscope of personal impressions. The history, theory, and comparative study of *pédagogie* (a broader word in French than English) offered ways of understanding—and perhaps reforming—*l'esprit français* by relating it to the educational systems that shaped it, or even allegedly defeated it.¹⁵ Instead of vaguely lamenting a cultural psychology of weightless words, intellectuals attempted to pinpoint its educational foundations—and alter them. Ernest Renan, for example, targeted the “oratorical exercises” in French higher education (“less that of modern science than of the rhetors of the 4th or 5th century”) and contrasted these exercises with the immense contributions of the “historical and philological sciences” in German universities (Renan 1864, pp. 80, 84, 87). Although the process of educational reform still dealt in harsh and sometimes unreasonable generalizations, underneath *esprit* emerged curricula and educational objectives amenable to revision by critics, bureaucrats, and politicians.

As France looked eastward, it also looked backward. Historians such as Gabriel Compayré, a founder of the new *science pédagogique*, perceived the history of education as a history of religion whose conflicting factions—Protestants, Jesuits, Jansenists—yielded conflicting pedagogies (Guiney 2004, pp. 81–86). This history of education under Republican intellectuals depicted negative educational features that seemed amenable to reform—such as the centrality of rhetoric in the curriculum—alongside the villains who had established this system: not the sophists but the Jesuits, variously rendered, among other subjects of conspiracy theories, as the “cursed successors to the sophists of the Ancient World” (Nicolas 2015, p. 76). Sometimes fraught, sometimes fruitful, the concept of “sophistic Jesuits” has a long history, from Étienne Pasquier’s early claim that the “Jesuit” (a pejoration of *Jesuit*) is “none other than the Sophist of our Catholic Religion” (Pasquier 1982, p. 157) to Marc Fumaroli’s sympathetic exploration of Jesuit “sacred sophistics” and their debts to the second sophistic (Fumaroli 1980, pp. 279–98). Although the Jesuits contributed much to the *regia* of eloquence (see epigraph) and the esteem for rhetorical arts, determining their precise impact remains difficult given the byzantine “black legend” against them.¹⁶

To highlight a small part of this sprawling legendarium, Edgar Quinet characterized the “miracle” of Jesuit education as pure agonistic sophistry: “Intellectual struggles, word combats . . . spectacles, solemn debates, academic fencing, spiritual duels . . . artificial rivalries, written exchanges”, which deploy their “satanic genius of inertia” and “amus[ing] smoke” to stifle the genuine movement of thought (Quinet 1843, p. 255). A less hyperbolic but still passionate portrait comes from Renan. Notorious among modern rhetoric scholars for describing rhetoric as the “only error of the Greeks” (Renan 1890, p. 12), a couple decades earlier, Renan had directed his ire toward the “pseudo-humanist” Jesuits, their rhetorical *paideia*, and their harmful influence: “The French University has excessively imitated the Jesuits, their dull harangues, and their Latin verses; it is too reminiscent of the ancient rhetors during the decline of Rome. The great defect [*mal*] of the French, the need to perorate, the tendency for everything to degenerate into declamation, a part of the University sustains by its obstinate scorn for the content of knowledge and its determination to only value style and talent” (Renan 1868, pp. 292–93, v). Even in his invectives, Renan affirmed an important link between the rhetorical temperament of France and its educational priorities and influences.

Renan’s writings, later reinforced by Emile Durkheim’s *L’Évolution pédagogique en France*, prompted Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron to claim that “the teaching of the Jesuits should doubtless be seen as the source of most of the systematic differences which distinguish the intellectual ‘temperament’ of the Catholic countries marked by its influence from that of the Protestant countries” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p. 170 n16). Although this statement would take a book or more to evaluate, refute, or substantiate, it represents progress within the study of collective intellectual temperaments to the extent that it draws on data from four centuries of humanist education and would therefore mitigate the problem of impressionistic generalizations of *esprit*. For our purposes, the most important Jesuit contribution to French education is not a specific sophistic or rhetorical precept but their emphasis on models and values based on *aemulatio* (rivalry, competition) in pursuit of eloquence,¹⁷ which left its traces on twentieth-century education in France.

6. Traveling the Royal Road

The sophistic elements of *voie royale* can be introduced through Jean-Paul Sartre’s anecdote about the philosopher Brice Parain:

Parain, like so many others, came to the city. Yet here what he first encountered was not the technical language of the factories and worksites—it was rhetoric. I knew, at the École Normale, many such sons of the peasantry, whose exceptional intelligence snatched them from the soil. They held vast, earthy silences, only to burst forth and dissertate upon the most abstract of subjects, expounding, like the Socrates of the *Clouds*, point by point each pro and con, with virtuosity and pedantry in equal, amusing measure. And then, they fell back into silence. These intellectual gymnastics remained visibly foreign to them, merely a game, a slight sound at the surface of their silence. Parain was one of these *normaliens*. (Sartre 1947, p. 181)¹⁸

Sartre’s anecdote illuminates an important sociolinguistic phenomenon: students in elite higher education are forced to acquire a foreign academic sociolect. With this sociolect comes remarkable features beyond mere word choices, including a *gymnastique* (a fairly common and neutral descriptor in this discourse) that brings to mind the Aristophanic confounding of Socrates with the sophist, the ambiguous speaker who can show off *le pour et le contre* of some abstruse matter in the manner of the sophistic antilogic. Or to cite Bourdieu and Passeron’s critique of the magisterial “dead language” (*langue morte*), literary teaching “comes down to an exchange of words”: “It takes the form of a verbal exhibition

which is more like the *epideixis* of the Sophists than the display exercises of the classroom monitor” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1994, pp. 8, 20). Although the teaching they critique entailed more than acquiring and demonstrating epideictic skill in a “dead” sociolect, such exhibitions—displays of eloquence, erudition, and emulation—were of paramount importance in evaluating students’ progress along the *voie royale*.

7. The Vocational View: The *Maîtres du Logos* According to Jean Guéhenno

The intellectual gymnastics by *normaliens* may be understood as a “game”, but for Guéhenno, it is a game with grave political consequences. “Normalien sophistry”, as he calls it, merits an ethical interpretation, even if the ethical view has its limitations when the burden rests solely on individuals rather than institutions. In the occupied Paris of November 1941, Guéhenno captured a *logos* that could be a tool for philosophical good or collaborationist evil, providing a touchstone for the vocational view of sophistry:

My métier is making normaliens, a species I know pretty well. And there is nowhere in France, I think, that brings together young people more devoted to beauty, truth, and all the ideal values than at the École Normale, or in one of its preparatory classes, a khâgne. But certainly nowhere else can one also observe what an evil power culture can assume, what an ignoble tool the logos can be. A sizable number of these khâgneux and normaliens achieve brilliant careers in French society, and some without ever betraying their first vocation. But some others will rank among the most notorious adventurers in business, politics, and journalism. For there is in every good khâgneux a mind capable of pledging itself to noble and disinterested research and, at the same time, a dangerous dialectical ability through which he is always tempted to profit. The practice of logos enables one to do anything, to serve falsehood as well as truth. Among these marvelous young men I deal with every year, I hardly struggle to discern, alas, those who will, by lack of a certain character or by their excesses of greed, haste, or even skill, turn into the new sophists serving the powers that be, into the dishonorable servants of the strongest, whoever that may be. These are the “maids-of-all-work” [bonnes à tout faire]. Thus each cohort of normaliens has its lot of Graeculi esurientes [hungry little Greeks].¹⁹ (Guéhenno 1947, p. 241)

Guéhenno then invokes a trio of infamous *normaliens* on the extreme right—Robert Brasillach, Marcel Déat, and Pierre Pucheu—who would all be sentenced to death in a few short years.²⁰ These three “masterpieces of the École and Logos”, as Guéhenno dubs them, belong to the category of “dishonorable servants of the strongest”—sophists akin to the Thrasymachus of Plato’s *Republic*. In his lesser-known memoir, *Changer la vie* (Guéhenno 1961), Guéhenno devotes his chapter “la découverte du logos” to reflecting on his ethical and philosophical initiation into the ENS. The *logos* entered his student life as “the unknown God for whom I was searching”, the double “medium of lying and of truth”, indeed “the greatest force at men’s disposal” (Guéhenno 1961, p. 206). After mentioning the “first sophists”—Tisias and Corax—and Socrates, he continues, “all of those who became *maîtres du logos* seemed to be those responsible for order and disorder, for the justice and injustice of the world.” He then launches into an ethical meditation on rhetoric:

I saw us in great peril. I now perceived clearly that the rhetoric we were striving to know and practice in its subtle recipes was only the most lovely [accorte], the most expert maid-of-all-work [bonne à tout faire] that men had discovered for launching, achieving, or hiding their schemes, and that we ourselves risked becoming but the valets of this admirable servant. Here one acquired a method, a tool, a trick of the hand that made you suited for everything, but especially for

giving an appearance of order to disorder through the classification or even elimination of too ugly or embarrassing facts; through strategy, the skillful marshalling of reasons and arguments, and the art of presenting and engaging them only at the ideal time; through the invention of images that scramble or transfigure reality as needed, this magical way of dispatching and losing adversaries in the darkness; through eloquence; through—ultimately and above all—the power of always finishing strong and, at the last moment, setting alight an enduring dawn, dazzling, for a long while, the eyes of the poor people to whom you speak. This is how lawyers win their cases, how presidents of great companies craft their reports and tabulate their balance sheets, how statesmen guarantee the prosperity of their peoples, how diplomats make peace. The institution that brought us together, the law that worked out our future, merely foresaw that we would become teachers and rather poor buggers slated for vegetating in the provinces, feebly representing the life of mind and losing their hair. But even these functions, modest and obscure as they were, did not strike me as innocent if we accepted becoming accomplices and if, to be more exact, we were the *maîtres du logos*, the poorly paid and somewhat misunderstood propagandists of this general trickery [fourberie], thanks to which the world continues to go round.²¹ (Guéhenno 1961, pp. 207–8)

Whereas the previous passage applied the term *bonne à tout faire* to unscrupulous *normalien* sophists, in this description, rhetoric itself becomes the maid-of-all-work (its young femininity emphasized by *accorte*). Guéhenno sustains one ancient tradition of regarding rhetoric as instrumental—a servant or handmaid—that must be bound by ethical strictures.

The combination of his wartime journal and memoir offers a provocative account of the power and pedigree of *logos* being passed from teacher to student and ultimately into the student's vocation within society. After Guéhenno's journal emphasizes the decisive role of individual student makeup and morality in guiding the use of *logos* (a deficit in character, he suggests, is a risk factor for sophistry), the memoir sustains the lexicon of moral inquiry ("innocent", "accomplices"). A vital level of analysis, however, seems missing in these passages: the institutional procedures of and responsibility for sophistry, for sophistic performances are in fact built into the *concours* and the extensive training that leads to it.

8. The Pedagogic Perspective: Omniloquacity

Whereas Gorgias professed that trusting *kairos* (Philostr. VS 1.praef) would grant him omniloquacity, French education systematized it. By the Third Republic, critics disparaged the ambition of "speak[ing] about anything without preparation" (Boissier 1872, p. 695) and the "talent to expound [*dissenter*] on everything one knows or knows not" (Brunot 1896, p. 18). Even if it became increasingly taboo, this garrulous omniloquacity survived to the extent that it was a *de facto* requirement, well into the postwar period, within an elite examination environment that punished confessions of ignorance. The "*dissertatio de omni re scibili*", Bourdieu claimed in 1966, "dominates the great literary *concours*" and "still plays an important role in the scientific *concours*" (Bourdieu 1966, p. 340). But what does *concours*, often rendered as "competitive examination", actually mean? An examination or *concours*, often advertised as a democratic instrument, involves both the test and contest: on one hand, one receives a grade, but on the other, a verdict on whether one ranks among the best or the rest.

The entrance exam of the ENS (the *concours d'entrée*) demands of students—and hence of their teachers—a range of humanistic knowledge and skills that require years of arduous training. In the nineteenth century, the challenge of this *concours* gave rise to the *khâgne* system, which formalized the practice of returning to the *classe de rhétorique*

for extra preparations (but only after completing the lesser challenge of the *baccalauréat de philosophie*) (Sirinelli 1986, pp. 592–93). For the *concours d'entrée* one must translate from Greek and Latin into French (*versions*), translate into Latin (*thèmes*), and demonstrate knowledge of European history, philosophy, and French literature. Yet, at least in the account of Célestin Bouglé, an École Normale director during the 1930s, the judging criteria remained primarily rhetorical: “Examiners must value [*apprécier*], above all, the qualities of composition and expression” (Bouglé 1938, p. 21). The written field had what Aron called the “crowning trial” (*épreuve reine*): the *dissertation* (Aron 1983, p. 455), which demanded formal abilities such as planning and structuring (rhetorical *dispositio*) (Genette 1966, p. 298). This formalism seems to have saturated the *khâgne*. Pierre Nora, for example, complained of the tripartite writing structures he faced at every level, “the sacrosanct tripartisanism of the government of *l'esprit khâgneux*” (Nora 1980, p. 6). An argument is often made, in line with Renan’s old criticisms, that form came at the expense of content: the young *khâgneux* are forced to master form to make the best of their limited knowledge, which has been induced by force-feeding or “cramming” (*gavage*). Bourdieu goes so far as to claim that “training in the dissertation *de omni re scibili*, the centre of the whole [*khâgne*] system, encouraged a self-confidence verging on triumphant unawareness of ignorance” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 36). In short, this intensely competitive environment encouraged the production of virtuosic display-pieces—a modern echo of the ancient sophistic *epideixis*.

Alain, for instance, famously taught the genre of the *topo*, a kind of brief topical sketch or essay. A *topo* might concern a general topic such as “superstitions, space, music, [or] theatre”, but it could be inflected with personal experience and observation. Annotating the margins, Alain would then respond with commentary—*mal dit, gauche, liez mieux, scolaire, la fin est informe*—apparently focused on the expressive qualities of the prose (de Sacy 1952, pp. 46–47). Bourdieu regards the *topo* as “closely tailored to the letter and spirit of the syllabus and meeting perfectly, in themes, sources, style and even spirit, the examination requirements for admission to the École Normale Supérieure.” He compares the *topo* to Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*, “perhaps the first historic example of a demonstration of professorial skill combined with something like a ‘crib’” (Bourdieu 1967, pp. 347–48). The *topo*, unlike the *dissertation* that is actually tested, allows for personal creativity on the part of students. Yet it also allowed Alain to hone the eloquence of his students across many shorter, low-stakes exercises, which likely enhanced its preparatory efficacy.

True omniloquacity demands that one is prepared—somehow—for everything. Unlike the boasting of Gorgias reported by Philostratus, the infinite horizon of topical possibilities genuinely troubled aspiring *normaliens*. Brasillach describes his *concours* preparation thusly:

We would revise for the subjects of the *concours*, attending, above all, to surprises. We recalled, with terror and indignation, certain questions posed by sadistic examiners who could ask candidates to speak for ten minutes about “the streets of Alexandria” or “the games of Greek children.” The oral part of the *concours* entailed drawing a random subject, working on it for ten to twenty minutes, and then presenting it for the same length of time. [The *khâgne* of] Louis-le-Grand prepared one very well for these exercises, and, independently of class hours, teachers made us take mini-exams, termed *colles*, on all the program materials. . . . But the *colles* we posed to ourselves were no less useful. We chose the most difficult subjects and those about which we plainly knew nothing, for it important to avoid being silent during the exam. One could claim that this oratorical exercise was quite dangerous and characteristically *normalien* because it accustomed us to speak with aplomb upon things we knew nothing about. I would agree readily,

but it also imbued us with a considerable self-assurance, tempered by irony.²² (Brasillach 1968, pp. 20–21)

He goes on to recount barely making the cut in the oral exams,²³ which nine out of ten candidates failed: “Another week of drills, with one or two interrogations per day, the preparation of absurd subjects, the confident parade of shaky ideas disguised as certainties” (Brasillach 1968, p. 56).²⁴ What can we observe about passages that describe preparing to “speak with aplomb upon things we knew nothing about”? First, this “nothing” is not quite nothing. Students presumably summon diffuse bits of *culture générale* (roughly, “general knowledge” but—to recall Hegel—perhaps also *Bildung*), an explicit priority of humanistic education. If asked to describe the streets of Alexandria, one could make probabilistic inferences from Alexander’s reputation (probably a “great” grid of streets, not a winding mess) or from foggy recollections of any ancient urban site. And second, the reason one must “speak with assurance” on obscure or unknown subjects turns out to be a de facto pedagogic procedure designed to encourage intellectual fluency, not skill in prevaricating. As with Brasillach in the *khâgne* of Louis-le-Grand, the experience of Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Sorbonne brings together a triangle: the exigence of an examination, a difficult preparation process, and the tested ability to deliver a speech on something uncomfortably obscure:

To prepare for the concours and this supreme trial, the *leçon* (which consists of addressing a randomly chosen question after a few hours of preparation), my classmates and I pitched each other the most extravagant subjects. I strove to ready, within ten minutes, a sturdy dialectical framework for an hour-long speech upon the respective merits of the bus and streetcar. The method not only furnishes a master key (*passe-partout*), but also prompts one to only perceive, among the riches of themes for reflection, a solitary form. (p. 53)²⁵

The *dissertations philosophiques* and *leçons* facing Lévi-Strauss and his peers could be conquered, he recalls, by playing a “game” of “static antinomies” such as “rational and irrational” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 58). Lacking the ability to change the rules of the game, the test-taker summons the requisite instrumental rationality for winning a life-altering prize, attempting to secure the *passe-partout* for the given examination. Only later, in hindsight and in a position of comfort, does the value rationality take hold and compel the memoirist to confess to the ruses of omniloquacity in *Tristes Tropiques*—a book that eloquently exemplifies this ability to range over a vast array of subjects.

9. The Sophist and the *Pècufieur*

To expand on this pedagogic view of sophistry, an amusing account of the term “PQ” (*papier cul*, or toilet paper) at the ENS proves valuable. This testimony from the *normalien* sociologist Raymond Boudon, although it concerns a later period, again makes the link between rhetoric and the *concours* explicit. Sophistic practices can involve “papering”:

In the École Normale of the late 1950s, the notion of “PQ”, literally designated, accordingly to a generally accepted etymology, “*papier cul*” and, by extension, simply paper. In a broad figurative sense, it designated any text, any argumentation, any written or spoken elaboration. In a narrow figurative sense, a PQ was a text—written or spoken—dominated by rhetoric. But this complex concept included many other nuances: it could evoke, in a pejorative sense, an inadvertently rhetorical text; in a laudatory sense, a deliberately rhetorical, indeed sophisticated text. A “good PQ” was a written piece or presentation answering the scholastic requirements of the *dissertation philosophique*, a decisive trial for the *concours d’entrée* for the École Normale. A “bad PQ” was most often a text poorly

put together from a rhetorical point of view. In any case, good and bad PQ were not at all distinguished by their interest or content, only by their form.

The word PQ represented an essential piece of vocabulary among literary *normaux*. One couldn't go a day without hearing it a hundred times. It had, of course, its declensions. The “pècufieur” was one who demonstrated an excessive penchant for rhetoric. But the verb “pécufier” could also be used in a neutral sense . . . (Boudon 1994, pp. 528–29)²⁶

Boudon proceeds to single out Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* as being overrun with “PQ” (p. 530). The sociologist expands from his observations of a *culte de PQ* in parts of ENS during the 1950s to criticize broader swaths of French intellectualism that allegedly confuse “rhetoric and thought” and lapse into “mysticism” and “irrationalism” in the coming decades (p. 531). The divisions he lays out, however, are not quite so tidy. The pairing of “rhetoric and thought”, and the notion that PQ represents an exclusively rhetorical category, merges with the problem of *inventio*: rhetoricians might say that the ideational process already has a rhetorical aspect. It follows that speaking or writing cannot be a process giving an entirely pre- or non-rhetorical thought a rhetorical form.

Perhaps a more holistic way of seeing this is that the noted *pècufieurs* of the ENS develop linguistic *mētis* (cunning, wiles, ruses)—sometimes irreducible to conscious applications of precepts and principles—in response to demands of the *concours*. Like the journey of Odysseus (a man of *polumētis*, or many wiles), the educational odyssey of the *voie royale* deploys expedient sophistic techniques in the face of hardship. Although *mētis* may connote “treachery” and “disloyal trick[ery]”, as Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant detail in their classic *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*,²⁷ *mētis* remains in “every confrontation or competitive situation . . . the absolute weapon, the only one that has the power to ensure victory . . . whatever the conditions of the conflict” (Detienne and Vernant 1991, p. 13). Might not modern pedagogic *mētis* be the same, housed, as it was in Greece, within deeply agonistic contexts? After noting that “a series of trials [*épreuves*] often decides an existence” in French education, Pierre Emmanuel examines the ruses of the *khâgneux* against examinations: “We baptize with the term ‘method’ a *trick* [*truc*] that functions whatever the object to which it is applied, because this object has no importance in itself and is only a pretext for the reflex acquisition of the *trick*, which itself has no importance except for passing the exam. This is how the intellect, through habit, comes to identify itself with this *trick*, this infallible procedure to void ideas of all substance and the real of all reality” (Emmanuel 1971, p. 152). On this account, masters and apprentices of *logos* acquire, deploy, and absorb tricks in their pedagogic struggle, turning them, perhaps, into a second nature. Immersed in this notion of the trick, identifying a *pècufieur* or sophist by means of an excessive penchant for rhetoric makes increasingly little sense: the rhetorical inclination was precisely of the right—or efficacious—degree or measure. Eventual judgements about rhetorical excess are irrelevant, in the heat of the moment, to candidates consumed by the *concours*, although they continue to be engaged by exegetes and critics working with the published texts that these candidates eventually produced.

10. Conclusions

In this essay, we have seen glimpses of a continuum: at one end, sophistry is vocation, a descriptor for persons that relates to their *métier* or moral makeup; at the other, sophistry is pedagogical resource, a *habitus* that works within a field (to use Bourdieu's terminology). If one is doing philosophy, then the more vocational approaches of Alain Badiou or Barbara Cassin make sense: one might want to create a dual or tripartite definition—sophist, philosopher, anti-philosopher—to apprehend a given *maître du logos* such as Jacques Lacan. Cassin explains that her book, *Jacques the Sophist*, constitutes an “extended commentary”

on Lacan's statement that "the psychoanalyst is a sign of the presence of the sophist in our time, but with a different status" (Cassin 2020, p. 25). Yet such vatic utterances and their archetypal modes of thought, applied to the multifarious masters of *logos* of France, pose certain risks for understanding modern French sophistry. The sophist archetype presents a heightened case of identitarian thinking, the *identifizierendes Denken* famously criticized by Theodor Adorno. This (often unavoidable) pattern of thought fixates on what something exemplifies—a certain figure, for instance, exemplifying a sophist—but in doing so obscures the identity of the entity in question. The identification Badiou makes in stating, "the sophist is from the outset the enemy-brother, philosophy's implacable twin", certainly serves his critique: "Philosophy today . . . considers the great sophists—for there are great sophists—as great philosophers" (Badiou 1992, p. 116). Yet can these two fraternal vocations adequately capture the modern labour market of *logos*, first evoked in this essay by Guéhenno?

Whereas Plato's world had its reliable ancient trades, such as shipbuilding, that Socrates dignifies with the term *technē*, the roles and vocational tendencies of twentieth century intellectuals expand, intermingle, and dissolve, financially supported by complex state institutions and to a lesser extent by personal initiatives such as paid writing and tutoring. Consider the unclassifiable Barthes, a non-*normalien* and non-*agrégé* who shifted around marginal institutions, disciplinary affinities, and sundry roles—researcher, essayist, journalist, teacher of seminars—before finally being consecrated by the Collège de France as "Chair of Literary Semiology". No single moniker will ever suffice to designate the modern *sophiste*. Yet whether we call them *écrivains*, *philosophes*, *maîtres à penser*, *maître-penseurs*, *clerics*, *savants*, *intellocrates*, or "French Theorists", most received pedagogic imprints from sophistic practices enshrined in elite educational trajectories. For those interested in understanding collective intellectual temperaments, these imprints remain crucially important.

In general, the formation of an *esprit* poses a complex problem: too many social layers, groups, and categories, too many institutions, too many ideological channels. In this deliberately simplified case of the *voie royale*, however, some progress can be made: an omniloquacity evidently adapted and thrived within its original agonistic environment. In light of the evidence presented here, it is easy to concur with Bourdieu and Passeron when they describe the *concours d'entrée* for the ENS: "The schemes of expression and thought which are too hastily put down to 'national character' or 'schools of thought' may well derive from the models organized by a training directed towards a particular type of academic test" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p. 143). Yet their claim could be generalized.

A test or *concours* that shapes "schemes of expression and thought" need not be academic. Pre-existing models of the athletic *agôn* and struggles for scarce resources—property in Syracuse, if we believe second-hand accounts of the origins of ancient Greek rhetoric—invited legalistic rhetorical innovation among Sicilian sophists, just as competitions for social distinction and less significant material prizes, such as the Catalan *Jocs Florals* (floral games) or the *Rederijkerskamers* (rhetoric chambers) of the Low Countries, incited poetic and dramatic competition. And today, from job interviews to manuscript submissions, Anglophone intellectual venues may partake in the selective logic of the *concours d'entrée* and in turn make sophistic practices more lucrative. The presence of agonism alone, however, does not determine sophistic nuance, which can range from the happier, creative sophistry of French *Bildung* that impressed Hegel to the ignoble sophistic *logos* troubling Guéhenno and employed by maids-of-all-work of Vichy France. Understanding emergent forms of sophistry within a given venue and social context can and should draw on a suite of social sciences—and must, to the extent that modern *homo sophisticus* leads an economic, social, political, and intellectual life irreducible to stock characters drawn from Athens

and its foreign guests. Yet this sophistic person or species, as I have been suggesting, can simply be a misleading level of analysis, stretched between too many roles like the mythic German “egg-laying wool-milk-pig” (*eierlegende Wollmilchsau*). The pursuit of sophistic milieus, situations, environs, markets, incentives, and habitats calls for a less moralistic and archetypical inquiry and yields sketches of practices rather than philosophical taxonomies of individuals. Classifications and moral judgements may be warranted but must also take stock of institutions, which tend to be neglected by close readers of texts.

What can be said, in the end, of the liaisons between sophistry and *l’esprit français*? National stereotypes, formed by observers generalizing about an intractably heterogeneous phenomenon such as the mental ways of life in France, may well turn out to be empirically dubious despite their intuitive appeal. Consider, for example, the intriguing hypothesis of Theodore Zeldin: perhaps there is a French mode of argument and thought that distinguished one as “French” even more than proficiency in the language (Zeldin 1977, p. 205). When one zooms in close enough, however, heterogeneity begins to dissipate; generalizations approach being reasonable. Reaching an institutional magnification, one finds *mâîtres du logos* such as Sartre, Aron, and Foucault related to each other by virtue of their “way of reasoning or expression”, which Sirinelli attributes to the “assiduous gymnastics of their *khâgne* years”. Most of the various *familles d’esprit* to be found in the *khâgne*, he continues, admit “a point in common: an absolute reverence for language” (Sirinelli 1986, p. 620). It is this reverence, ideologically, and an omniloquacity, more practically, that brings to mind the lordly Gorgianic *logos* from *Encomium of Helen*.

I have also been gesturing here, however, toward a great civilizational chasm between prototypical Greek sophists and French *mâîtres du logos*. This chasm is nowhere more evident than in the difference between the pedagogic practices of the sophists of Periclean Athens, with their direct transactions and the clear legal and political thrust of rhetoric, and the complex educational institutions of church and state that proliferated across Europe, with their strenuous rationalizations of their existence and their continued teaching of “humane letters” under Christian monarchies. Nine motives for *litterae humaniores* can already be found among the first Jesuits (de Polanco [1547] 2016), and later rationale never seem simple or singular. Rhetoric, crowning this humanistic educational program, had in France “survived every regime”, as Quinet once complained, “every change of opinion and government”, and “no storm could uproot” this stubborn “perennial plant, naturally born of the old Gallic soil” (Quinet 1878, p. 166). Rhetoric’s reputation declined, however, until it was eliminated as a secondary education class in 1902, while incentives and venues for sophistic practices, sampled in this essay, remained. Dedicated to his sociological exposé of an elite institution system, even Bourdieu “could not escape his own version of [rhetoric’s] cadences”, this perplexing “hyphen between literature and philosophy” vital to the creative “effervescence”, as Perry Anderson put it, of the 1960s (Anderson 2011, p. 143). Although preliminary, the ethnographic work in this essay shows that modern French sophistry constitutes a collection of practices, normally difficult to enumerate yet laid bare by the *concours*, that offer means to pedagogic ends—practices that later flourish or die off, proliferating or dissolving into the sundry mannerisms of an intellectual elite—yet rarely ever coalesce into the sort of solid creature that could be, in the imagery of Plato’s *Sophist*, hunted, seized, and delivered by a “kingly *logos*” (*basilikou logos*) (235c).

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Notes

- ¹ Quid, inquam, agitis aliud, nisi ut aliquem in Eloquentiae regia locum possitis obtinere? . . . Laudabit patria vestram hanc honoris praeclari cupiditatem, Eloquentia suos Candidatos ultro admittet, ac premis ingentibus munerabitur.
- ² Alluding to Aristotle’s criticism of the sophists as being like shoe-makers who do not teach the art of shoemaking but instead display all manner of shoes, Barthes writes, “I don’t construct the concept of Neutral, I display Neutrals” (Barthes 2005, p. 11).
- ³ Although properly situating this sophistic *esprit* among all the other *esprits* associated with France would demand another article, one should immediately note a few things. Tendencies and manners of thought are often exemplified (yet abstracted) in great thinkers, such as the *l’esprit de l’analyse* of Pascal or Descartes, the “critical” and “logical” spirit set against “confusion and contradiction” (Lanson 1917, p. 757); this *l’esprit de l’analyse* is one of the idealized versions of *l’esprit français*. Ways of thinking are also often linked to the language, as in *clarté française*. In this discussion, the focus is on a specific educational trajectory, not a larger claim about a national literature, language, or culture; the past and present discourse on *esprits* tolerates many contradictions because of its eagerness to generalize about heterogeneous groups of individuals. Thus, the scope here is deliberately tighter and less eclectic than the typical vignettes.
- ⁴ Pico’s *900 Theses* (1486), which boasts of this great scope, yields the Latin phrase; others have lengthened in jest: *de omni re scibili et quibusdam aliis* (of all things knowable and certain others). In the late nineteenth century, it begins to appear more frequently in critical discussions of education.
- ⁵ For a gloss of the quoted passage, see (Cassin 2017, p. 147). For this ability in Hipias, see *Hp. mi.*363c-d.
- ⁶ I am thinking here of two classic studies (Furet and Ozouf 1982; Weber 1976).
- ⁷ A sizable group of scholars interested in literary pedagogy have published helpful work in *Yale French Studies*, but scholarship that considers French philosophy’s relationship to its educational institutions is rare. Alan D. Schrift emphasizes the *agrégation*’s “enormous impact” on the content French philosophy through the specific texts upon which one is tested (Schrift 2008, p. 453). Edward Baring argues that “the practice of deconstruction was a response to the conflicting demands of the exam, and that Derrida’s later criticism and resistance to the *agrégation concours* grew out of an early and intimate involvement with it”. One imagines Derrida focused on his prodigious output of books, and yet, “the majority of the pages that Derrida wrote during the 1960s and 70s were lecture courses preparing students for the concours” (Baring 2011, pp. 222–23).
- ⁸ In this discussion, the word “elite” should be understood as referring to the *voie royale* and/or other related and exclusive educational pathways, not a precise description of social class; much scholarship has, however, addressed the positive correlation between parental economic and cultural capital and the prestige, exclusivity, and quality of the student’s school. I will always be referring to the humanistic *voie royale*, not the scientific one (depicted in the 2023 film of the same name). In the mid-twentieth century, this humanistic trajectory proved so remarkably potent that Bourdieu chose to begin his *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* by introducing, instead of his childhood, the *khâgne* and *concours*.
- ⁹ Elsewhere, Bourdieu himself considers the sophists in connection to habitus: “the pedagogy of the Sophists, forced, in order to realize its aim, to produce systems of rules, such as grammars or rhetorics, came up against the problem of the rules defining the right way and right moment—*kairos*—to apply the rules, or, as the phrase so aptly goes, *to put into practice* a repertoire of devices or techniques, in short, the whole art of performance, in which the habitus inevitably reappears” (Bourdieu 2011, p. 20).
- ¹⁰ The ENS, compared to the labours of the *khâgne*, the *concours*, and repeating it after failure, might be experienced as “three years of summer holidays [*grandes vacances*] in the fullest material and intellectual freedom” (Brasillach 1968, p. 58). Once inside the ENS’s letters division, one had almost secured a place (at least in the earlier twentieth century) within “elite” French cultural, political, and civic life. The proposed marketing slogan for Albert Thibaudet’s *La République des professeurs*, “France is run by Normale Ltd.”, does not seem so far off during the 1920s (Sirinelli 1981, p. 67). In the later twentieth century, with its new *grandes écoles* and democratic expansion efforts, educational pathways to intellectual and political office will become more pluralized and the great old trajectories loosen their hold—the royal road of Aron, Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone Weil, or the still-noble routes undertaken by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Simone de Beauvoir, who were still *agrégés de philosophie*.
- ¹¹ In the long run, this research should be taken up by those making serious comparisons or contrasts with classical Athens, which bristles with ambiguities over the oligarchic, aristocratic, demagogic, and democratic interests that sophistic training conceivably served (de Romilly 1992, pp. 213–17). My sporadic references to Athens of the fourth or fifth century BCE represent a regrettable product of a common cognitive model of ancient sophistry that reduces its immense temporal and geographic breadth (captured in this issue) to its most philosophically infamous period.
- ¹² For rhetoric’s central role in the career of Barthes, see (Doering 2021); for broader rhetorical dynamics as theorized by Jean Paulhan, see (Doering 2022). For key rhetorical manifestos, see Brunetière’s “An Apology for Rhetoric” (1890) and Barthes’ “The Future of Rhetoric” (c. 1946). The relationship between politics and sophistic practices—serving both aristocratic and democratic ends—in modern France is a rich topic that merits future work.

- 13 See also 22 January 1875: “The French mind is superficial and yet not comprehensive; it has an extraordinarily fine edge, and yet no penetrating power. Its desire is to enjoy its own resources by the help of things, but it has none of the respect, the disinterestedness, the patience, and the self-forgetfulness, which, are indispensable if we wish to see things as they are. Far from being the philosophic mind, it is a mere counterfeit of it, for it does not enable a man to solve any problem whatever, and remains incapable of understanding all that is living, complex, and concrete. Abstraction is its original sin, presumption its incurable defect, and plausibility its fatal limit.” (Amiel 1921, p. 219)
- 14 In Deutschland kann die geistige Kultur philosophisch sein, in Frankreich kann sie nur literarisch sein.
- 15 The urgency of reform felt heightened after France was “beaten by the German schoolmaster” in the Franco-Prussian war, as one formula summed up the defeat (Bellesort 1931, p. 60).
- 16 See (Burke 2001) and (Nicolas 2015) for the conspiratorial dimensions; see the writings of François de Dainville, especially (de Dainville 1940), for exploring the real depth of Jesuit education.
- 17 For the original Jesuit school contexts, see (Grendler 2016).
- 18 [Brice] Parain, comme tant d’autres, est venu à la ville. Mais ce qu’il y a rencontré d’abord, ce n’est pas le langage technique des usines et des chantiers, c’est la rhétorique. J’ai connu, à l’École Normale, beaucoup de ces fils de paysans que leur intelligence exceptionnelle avait arrachés à la terre. Ils avaient d’énormes silences terriens dont ils sortaient tout à coup pour disserter sur les sujets les plus abstraits, soutenant, comme le Socrate des *Nuées*, tour à tour le pour et le contre, avec une égale virtuosité et un pédantisme qui s’amusait de lui-même. Et puis, ils retombaient dans le silence. Visiblement cette gymnastique intellectuelle leur demeurait étrangère, ce n’était pour eux qu’un jeu, un bruit léger à la surface de leur silence. Parain fut un de ces Normaliens.
- 19 C’est mon métier de faire des normaliens. C’est une espèce que je connais assez bien. Et je ne pense pas qu’il y ait nulle part en France rassemblement de jeunes gens plus dévoués à la beauté, à la vérité, à toutes les valeurs idéales, qu’à l’École normale ou dans une classe de préparation à l’École normale, une khâgne. Mais nulle part non plus sans doute on ne peut aussi nettement voir quelle mauvaise puissance peut être celle de la culture, quel ignoble outil peut être le *logos*. Un assez grand nombre de ces khâgneux et de ces normaliens font de brillantes carrières dans la société française. Et quelques-uns sans jamais trahir leur première vocation. Mais quelques autres comptent parmi les plus notoires aventuriers des affaires, de la politique ou du journalisme. C’est qu’il y a en tout bon khâgneux en même temps qu’un esprit capable de le vouer aux recherches nobles et désintéressées une habileté dialectique dangereuse dont il est toujours tenté de tirer profit. La pratique du *logos* rend apte à tout, au service du mensonge aussi bien que de la vérité. Parmi ces jeunes hommes merveilleux auxquels, chaque année, j’ai affaire, je n’ai guère de peine à discerner, hélas, ceux dont un certain manque de caractère, trop de gourmandise, trop de hâte, ou l’excès même de leur habileté feront les nouveaux sophistes au service des puissances établies, les domestiques ignobles du plus fort, quel qu’il soit. Ce sont les « bonnes à tout faire ». Chaque promotion de normaliens comporte ainsi son lot de *Graeculi esurientes*. L’un des derniers produits de cette discipline ambiguë semble être ce Pucheu, de la promotion 1919, qui, pressé de faire carrière, renonça tout de suite à l’agrégation, passa de l’Université aux affaires, de l’histoire à la sidérurgie, et, de conseil en conseil, de comité en comité, s’est élevé jusqu’à être aujourd’hui ministre de l’intérieur dans un gouvernement où, sous couleur de maintenir l’ordre et la vertu, il s’emploie à sauvegarder les intérêts des Trusts qui l’y ont délégué. Il se vante, dit-on, de « tenir la France pour quinze ans au moins ». Par son *logos* et sa police, sans doute. Mais ses camarades disent qu’il a eu tort de ne pas préparer l’agrégation d’histoire: il en serait moins sûr. Autres chefs-d’œuvre de l’École et du *logos*: Déat, Brasillach, etc. . .
- 20 Brasillach’s oratory during his gripping trial will not spare him from the firing squad; Déat alone escapes execution by fleeing to Italy.
- 21 Je nous voyais dans un grand péril. J’apercevais désormais clairement que la rhétorique dont nous nous appliquions à connaître et à pratiquer les subtiles recettes n’était que la plus accorte, la plus experte bonne à tout faire que les hommes eussent découverte pour entreprendre, achever ou cacher leurs manigances, et nous risquions de n’être nous-mêmes que les valets de cette admirable servante. Une méthode, une règle de travail, un tour de main qu’on prenait ici vous rendait apte à tout, mais plus particulièrement à donner l’apparence de l’ordre au désordre, par le classement, voire l’élimination des faits trop laids ou trop embarrassants, par la stratégie, l’habile rangement en bataille des raisons et des arguments, et l’art de ne les faire paraître et de ne les engager qu’à point nommé, par l’invention des images qui brouillent comme il faut le réel ou le transfigurent, une manière comme magique d’abolir l’adversaire et de le perdre dans les ténèbres, par l’éloquence enfin et surtout par le pouvoir de toujours bien finir et d’allumer, au dernier moment, une aurore dont les yeux des pauvres gens à qui vous parlez demeurent longtemps éblouis. C’est ainsi que les avocats gagnent leurs procès, que les présidents de grandes compagnies rédigent leurs rapports et dressent leurs bilans, que les hommes d’état garantissent la prospérité de leur peuples, que les diplomates font la paix. Et sans doute l’institution qui nous rassemblait, la loi que réglaient notre avenir prévoyait seulement que nous deviendrions professeurs et d’assez pauvres bougres destinés à végéter dans les provinces, à y représenter timidement l’esprit et à y perdre leurs cheveux. Mais ces fonctions mêmes, si modestes et obscures qu’elles fussent, ne me paraissaient pas innocentes si nous acceptions de devenir complices, et si précisément nous étions les maîtres du *logos*, les propagandistes mal payés et un peu méprisés de cette fourberie générale grâce à laquelle le monde continuerait d’aller comme il allait. (pp. 207–8)

- 22 Nous revisions les matières du concours, nous attachant surtout aux surprises. On se rappelait, avec terreur et indignation, les questions proposées par des examinateurs sadiques, qui avaient pu demander aux candidats de parler dix minutes sur «les rues d'Alexandrie» ou «les jeux des enfants grecs». A l'oral du concours, en effet, on tire au sort un sujet, on le travaille dix ou vingt minutes, et on l'expose pendant la même durée de temps. Louis-le-Grand préparait très bien à cet exercice, et presque tous les jours, indépendamment de nos heures de classes, des professeurs nous faisaient passer des examens en miniature, que l'on nommait des «colles», sur toutes les matières du programme. . . . Mais nos «colles» personnelles n'avaient pas une moindre utilité. Nous choissions les sujets les plus difficiles et ceux sur lesquels nous ne savions manifestement rien. Car il est important de ne pas rester muets à l'examen. On prétendra que cet exercice oratoire était fort dangereux et bien «normalien», car il nous habituaient à parler avec aplomb sur ce que nous ignorions. J'en conviendrai volontiers, mais il nous donnait aussi une assurance non négligeable, tempérée par l'ironie (pp. 20–21).
- 23 In the letters division of the ENS, he came 27th out of 28th (the cut-off) with about 350 candidates in total.
- 24 Et c'était de nouveau une semaine de manège, avec une ou deux interrogations par jour, la préparation des sujets saugrenus, l'exposé imperturbable de savoirs vacillants déguisés en certitudes. Cette fois-ci, je fus reçu de justesse. J'avais dix-neuf ans.
- 25 Pour préparer le concours et cette suprême épreuve, la leçon (qui consiste, après quelques heures de préparation, à traiter une question tirée au sort), mes camarades et moi nous proposions les sujets les plus extravagants. Je me faisais fort de mettre en dix minutes sur pied une conférence d'une heure, à solide charpente dialectique, sur la supériorité respective des autobus et des tramways. Non seulement la méthode fournit un passe-partout, mais elle incite à n'apercevoir dans la richesse des thèmes de réflexion qu'une forme unique.
- 26 Au sens propre, dans l'École normale de la fin des années 50, la notion de «PQ» désignait, selon une étymologie généralement admise, le «papier cul» et, par extension, le papier tout court. Au sens figuré *large*, elle désignait tout texte, toute argumentation, tout développement écrit or parlé. Au sens figuré *étroit*, un PQ, c'était un texte—écrit ou parlé—dominé par la rhétorique. Mais ce concept complexe comportait bien d'autres nuances: il pouvait évoquer, en un sens péjoratif, un texte *involtontairement* rhétorique; en un sens laudatif, un texte *volontairement* rhétorique, voire sophistiqué. Un «bon PQ», c'était un écrit ou un exposé répondant aux exigences scolaires de la dissertation philosophique, une épreuve décisive du concours d'entrée à l'École normale. Un «mauvais PQ», c'était le plus souvent un texte mal ficelé d'un point de vue rhétorique. En tout cas, bons et mauvais PQ ne se distinguaient en aucune façon par leur intérêt ou par leur contenu, mais seulement par leur forme. Le mot PQ représentait une pièce essentielle du vocabulaire des normaliens littéraires. Il ne se passait pas de journée qu'on ne l'entendît cent fois. Bien sûr, il se déclinait. Le «pécufieur» était celui qui manifestait un penchant excessif à la rhétorique. Mais le verbe «pécufier» pouvait être utilisé aussi en un sens neutre. Donner une conférence, brillante ou mortelle, c'était «pécufier». . . .
- 27 This work, as well as Detienne's *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, consider sophists and rhetoric in provocative terms and fresh contexts for rhetorical studies. I introduce it in the hopes that it will be eventually done justice and fully harnessed.

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