Nietzsche, Rhetoric, Philology

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Nietzsche, Rhetoric, Philology

James I. Porter

Il s’agit du point irréductible extrême où le geste est un corps, un espace, une figure. L’extrême irréductible de tel point est son obscénité: ce point-là n’est ni physique ni géométrique; il est la mémoire de ce qu’est le mouvement dans tout corps. Mais ce dernier est aussi bien affecté de cette mémoire inverse: le corps est une limite dans le mouvement. Cette réversion est infinie.


No inquiry into the problem of philology, its history, and its chances for recovery and a productive future can afford to overlook Friedrich Nietzsche, who perhaps more than anyone else in the nineteenth century helped to set the agenda for a critical and above all self-critical practice of philology. He paid for his act of daring, for his refusal of academic and cultural prejudices, with the ultimate price: rejection and exclusion, which ought to remind anyone who wishes to engage in a rigorous critique of philological practices that such a gambit is not a game, and if the establishment accepts and even rewards your findings, then this too is worthy of further inquiry. Have times truly changed? Has the establishment become liberal, tolerant, and soft? Or has it grown complaisant and indifferent? Perhaps philology is now irrelevant, a field in which anything can be said because nothing matters. Or perhaps one’s findings are a bit *too* acceptable, not trenchant enough to draw

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a rejection in turn. Or perhaps a critique of philology modeled after one like Nietzsche’s is too calibrated in terms of the privileged stakes of classical culture to find any translatable returns in a postmodern world in which the classics no longer resonate—though I personally find this last theory doubtful, as a quick glance at the media attention over the new Acropolis Museum in Athens strongly suggests, not to mention the unrelenting publications in classics and the swelling, not dwindling, undergraduate classical civilization majors in North America. Classics do matter, and a critique of classical philology ought to matter today as well. Nietzsche’s example was never more relevant. What can be learned from it?

A great deal, as Sean Gurd’s introduction to this volume makes crystal clear. For one, the mere inclusion of Nietzsche in any history of philology is obligatory, a natural first step in the recovery of philology’s internal bearings. His erasure from the official histories of philology was a shameful disgrace. More shameful was the way in which philologists, usually German, secretly continued to visit the Nietzsche archive in Weimar, the better to be able to appropriate whatever gems they could from his brilliant but unpublished *paralipomena* without detection. They forgot that by signing the guest registers they left a paper trail that could be followed years later. Then there is Nietzsche’s own method, or rather example. Neither is exactly imitable or capable of being described in a few words. But Nietzsche was a master of philology in every sense. Scrupulously trained, fastidious in his attention to detail, fluent in the languages of his disciplines and intimate with the most arcane primary and secondary sources (albeit with clear predilections for some areas within philology and a disregard for other areas of classics, principally material and visual culture), he was well grounded in the fields he proceeded to unground. He knew whereof he spoke. Finally, he had both feet solidly planted in the present. His critique of philology was cultural, presentist (in the best possible sense), and viewed from the perspective of life and the living. Not only was philology *never enough* for Nietzsche, which meant that philology, while in ways an end unto itself, in other ways was a conduit through which larger questions from adjacent areas of inquiry could be explored (chiefly, philosophy, psychology, and culture, usually in this ascending order). What is more, there is nothing arid about Nietzsche’s critique of philology: his writing is free of jargon, it is alive, it speaks to us today with a ferociousness and an urgency that he must have felt at the very moment he composed it; it is driven, it *howls*, even in his most pedantic-

3. For a partial list, see Cancik 1995.
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seeming footnotes. It knows that no assumption is immune to criticism, and that every claim to knowledge is open to objection, above all claims to knowledge about a past that has been conventionally idealized since classical antiquity itself. Nietzsche further knows that, like their objects, all critiques of philology contain a history and a habitus that are embedded in their very appearance of contemporaneity and futurity—appearances that are therefore often the most suspect of all. This is perhaps what makes all philology rhetorical to the core, namely, the concealed historical operations and the habits of the mind and heart lurking in the deepest grammars of its statements. But in order to grasp this last point, one must turn to Nietzsche’s critique of ancient rhetoric, an area which, as we shall see, opened up for him an entire field of speculation about the philosophy of thought and language beyond and through classics.

I. Listening to What Writing Says

In an essay from The Responsibility of Forms entitled “Listening,” Roland Barthes writes, “Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act. It is possible to describe the physical conditions of hearing (its mechanism) by recourse to acoustics and to the physiology of the ear; but listening cannot be defined only by its object or, one might say, by its goal” (emphasis in original). Barthes goes on to identify three degrees of listening: pragmatic or indexical, hermeneutic, and finally a complex attunement to signifiance (as against “signification,” following the distinction originally drawn by Kristeva). This third term of the aural Barthes polemically labels a modern faculty, and he uses John Cage as an example: “it is each sound one after the next that I listen to, not in its syntagmatic extension, but in its raw and as though vertical signifying: by deconstructing itself, listening is externalized, it compels the subject to renounce his ‘inwardness.’”

Listening at this pitch is “a general ‘signifying’ no longer conceivable without the determination of the unconscious.” As an externalization of the act of speech and hearing, with the intimacies of the unconscious raised to a surface level for inspection but barely audible nonetheless, the “grain” of the voice puts the subject in a pleasurable if precarious state between his or her faculties of comprehension, judgment, and engagement: the voice, sung or spoken, lies within and beyond reach, a double articulation, a sonority and a suggestion. Inflected with colorations, still body and material, the voice is also a site for

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4. Barthes 1985: 245; 259; emphasis in original.
formation and hardening, for the ultimacy of a shape that shades off into the intangibility of ordinary meaning. Another name for this phenomenon, which contrasts with listening in the strictly phenomenological sense, is the *geno-song*, which provides an “image of the body” through the quasi-physical, quasi-psychological, and ultimately dispersive, intersubjective, and active event of listening.\(^5\) With Barthes, compare the following:

> Once more: I become a better human being when this Bizet speaks to me. Also a better musician, a better *listener*. Is it even possible to listen better?—I actually bury my ears under this music to hear its *causes*. *It seems to me* *I experience its genesis*—I tremble before the dangers that accompany some strange risk; I am delighted by strokes of good fortune of which Bizet is innocent.—And, oddly, deep down I don’t think of it, or don’t know how much I think about it. For entirely different thoughts are meanwhile running through my head. (CW 1; second emphasis mine)

The words are now Nietzsche’s, although we might nonetheless insist that the *voice* is that which will one day be Barthes’s. Nietzsche, too, gives the phenomenon of the voice—of *style*—a kindly hearing. He listens to it with a “third ear,” ever attentive to its sources in a “geno-text” (for *causes* above, the German gives *Ursachen*; for *genesis*, *Entstehung*), to “the rhythmically decisive syllables,” to every “break with any excessively severe symmetry,” “every *staccato* and every *rubato,*” to “how delicately and richly” the “sequence of vowels and diphthongs . . . can be colored and change colors as they follow each other” (BGE 246). And again he notes:

> The most intelligible factor in language is not the word itself, but the tone, strength, modulation, tempo with which a sequence of words is spoken—in brief, the music behind the words, the passions behind the music, the person behind these passions: everything, in other words, that cannot be written.\(^6\)

The language in all three passages is a direct descendent of Nietzsche’s early lectures on rhythm, but especially his lectures on rhetoric, which will be the primary focus of this paper and to which we shall presently turn. But first, a small paradox: If Nietzsche’s statements from *Beyond Good and Evil* are a commentary, not on listening to the spoken voice, but on *read-*

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5. Barthes 1985: 255, 270, 276 (“it is not the psychological ‘subject’ in me who listens”).
ing the voice legibly embodied in a text,\(^7\) by the same token, which is to say, *for the same reasons*, so is the latter quotation about “everything that cannot be written,” despite its apparent favoring of voice over text.\(^8\) (If you have any doubts about this, just try reading the passage aloud.) What is this source and genesis of language, which would seem to underlie, and thus assume primacy over, both written texts and spoken utterances? And why does Nietzsche posit it, when to do so is to appear open to the charge of what he elsewhere calls *Phaenomeno-Manie* or “phenomenomania” (KSA 12.239)—of projecting causes where they are strictly unwarranted? Why assume that what “cannot be written” is *somehow more true*, more revealing, or even more intelligible, than what *can* be written? What is perhaps worse, why assume that the postulation of this dimension “beyond” or “behind” is any more valid than that of “the word itself,” or the aspects of language that have to be registered in all their apparent immediacy and then progressively subtracted away, by layers, in order that their putative source might be reached? For there is nothing in principle to prevent the logic of subtraction from being extended *ad infinitum*: if we include not just the passions, but the person, why not go behind the person to the surroundings, the history, or the collective national, cultural, or racial histories behind (but informing) the personal history, and so on, indefinitely? With each step, intelligibility recedes farther away, as does any grasp on the “phenomenalities” to which intelligibility is apparently tied (how can I take it in? how does it appear to me?—and yet, somehow I must, and it does). Perhaps Nietzsche has no other purpose in mind than to provoke this tailspin of logic. In fact, he probably does have this purpose in mind, and several others as well.

Surely part of the problem is the way in which the issue has been framed. Nietzsche is isolating the dimension of language that ordinarily goes under the name of rhetoric or style, but he is clearly attributing to it an extraordinary significance and a rare privilege. Style is not generally considered the cause of language or its source, because it is an effect of words. Nietzsche’s analysis is at the very least tendentious; more generously, we might call it hyperbolic. Let us assume that Nietzsche is aiming only at what escapes meaning so that meaning may be released—the uncodifiable elements of intelligibility, at the rich seam that lies between the body and discourse.

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7. Compare the following from Raymond Williams, which reads like a paraphrase of Nietzsche: “The true effects of many kinds of writing are indeed quite physical: specific alterations of physical rhythms, physical organization: experiences of quickening and slowing, of expansion and of intensification” (Williams 1977: 156).

8. As in KSA 10.22: “Because a writer lacks many of the means used by one who practices oral delivery, in general he must take as a model a very expressive kind of delivery: the copy of that (the written text) will necessarily look much paler in comparison.”
Even so, his position is far from clear. The body seems to be one of the instruments in this critical démontage of meaning; but then its serviceability is short-lived, for it too, must be jettisoned along with meaning, in favor of a greater, unknown intelligibility—one which, as we saw, may add up to no more than an insight into the contingency of meaning itself. Could Nietzsche's affirmation of the rhetorical essence of language itself be part of a larger rhetorical strategy?

So put, Nietzsche’s position begins to look less guilty of projecting knowledge into places where this is strictly unwarranted, and still less like a positive theory about language or the body “behind” (even if it is only within) language. At the very least, Nietzsche’s position seems to be a provocation and a challenge to common and even uncommon sense: his words seem to point to the opposite of what they seem to mean; yet he does mean what he says. The logic that drives meaning into its endless contingencies is both logically necessary and psychologically inescapable. We cannot prevent ourselves from construing language (any instance of “the word itself”) as an utterance, as stemming from a source, not least because language always is an utterance, stemming from some source. This observation about language and our relation to it is a fixed feature of Nietzsche’s critique of meaning at every stage of his writings. The critique is double-edged insofar as it acknowledges something like what we today would call the intentional fallacy, but implies something further: namely, that the greater fallacy is to imagine that one can escape from the fallacy of projection just by acknowledging it. Thus is Nietzsche able to offer us a phenomenology of reading and understanding and to take away its foundations in the same breath. Intriguingly, he locates the ever-elusive sources of meaning in the materiality of an utterance, but it is a materiality that is necessarily evanescent: here one moment, wherever meaning seems to crystallize, it is gone the next.

In what follows, I would like to concentrate on how the fates of the body’s materialism and that of language (which is just another way of naming what rhetoric is) are joined together by their strategic importance in Nietzsche’s assault on inherited and habitual ways of imagining the world. In demoting the concept of “the word itself” to incoherence, and in identifying rhetoric with the reason for this demotion, Nietzsche is anticipating Theodor Adorno, who in his Negative Dialectics views rhetoric, not as a formal technique, but as the birthright of all expression: it is, in his own striking words, “the body of language” and “the blemishing stain on thought.” Rhetoric scandalizes thought and language because it brings them back to our senses, confronts us with all their historical and contextual contingency, and renders thought both materially present (this is perhaps a phenomeno-
logical proposition) and, we might say, *materially* intelligible—intelligible insofar as it has a material history, which is emphatically not the same as the abstract and ideal intelligibility that thought’s expression would present by itself (this takes us beyond the phenomenology of meaning, in the direction of the more unwieldy contingencies of meaning). Rhetoric *situates* an utterance, radically and ineradicably, though not by referring it to some easily determined final instance. “In the qualitative character of rhetoric, culture, society, and tradition [actually] bring thought to life.” Both Adorno and Nietzsche are trading on the centuries-old hatred of rhetoric, what Adorno in the same place calls the *resentment* towards what rhetoric conjures in the minds of those who would disavow its relevance.

The argument has a special relevance today, not least owing to the prominence that rhetoric has received in poststructuralist circles in the guise of “rhetorical criticism.” But rhetorical criticism had a different meaning prior to deconstruction: it was once connected to the classical (Greek and Roman) art of persuasion, oratory, and the analysis of language. Nietzsche, the philologist turned philosopher, has been implicated as a crucial hinge in this transfer of technology from antiquity to postmodernity. If there is any way to recover the philological basis of rhetorical criticism, surely our best bet is to look to Nietzsche. As it happens, returning to Nietzsche will require that we return to antiquity as well. Furthermore, it will require of us a different kind of reading of Nietzsche—less a rhetorical reading than a philological one, a close, scrupulous, and unflinching reading that is not preordained, that does not set out to establish some pre-established truth about the figurative nature of all language and (hence) of all thought. Perhaps what a fresh approach to Nietzsche’s theory of rhetoric will most of all expose is that such limiting readings of his writings are themselves simply poor instances of philology.

As will be seen from the present essay, Nietzsche tracks language back to its sources beyond language into the realm of the body and the senses, where he finds that the ultimate “rhetoric” lies. Such reductionism, in its voluble muteness, is fatal to all plenary theories of meaning but especially to all models of linguistic determination (the bread and butter of poststructuralist theory). In Nietzsche’s hands, however, corporeal reductionism, with precedents in ancient rhetorical and philosophical traditions, is above all a way of disturbing modern paradigms of secure meaning: The very grounds on which this kind of materialism is premised are themselves in need of

9. Adorno 1973: 56; emphasis added. Adorno’s writings contain, and exhibit, a rhetorical insight that very much deserves to be discussed.
endless and insatiable proof at every turn, a fact that Nietzsche is the first to point out. In this way, Nietzsche’s philology of rhetoric leads back to a physiology of rhetoric, which in turn is premised on a historical inquiry in relation to which Nietzsche’s own working on and through the matter of rhetoric remains deeply respectful. (At the risk of a slight contradiction, which is really not one at all, we might say that Nietzsche respects the fact of historical inquiry, even if he does not always respect the facts of history that such inquiry brings to light.) His writings are an encyclopedic encounter with this history. Their materiality just is, in the end, the materiality of this history. And so too, only a philology attuned to Nietzsche’s language in all of its complication, perversity, and uncertain certainty will stand any chance of excavating its many and various layers of rhetoric.

RHETORIC ALWAYS invokes a repressed memory. Perhaps what characterizes Nietzsche’s willingness to stir up these memories once again, and the same holds for Adorno in his wake, is less his interest in original causes (the fully embodied and originary voice of an utterance) than his attention to the persistent effects that symptomatically come associated with the disavowal of rhetoric and everything it has come to represent (its scandalous nature). In Nietzsche’s case, this takes a peculiar turn, for he reads the disavowal of rhetoric in modern (if you like, bourgeois, or bürgerlich) society as a historical decline in rhetorical capacities—hence his blistering attack on the deafness of the German ear in the same passage from Beyond Good and Evil. In revenge, he does all he can to effect an untimely revival of rhetoric, be it in his own forms of writing or in his explicit theorizing of rhetoric. But the impression that Nietzsche tends to give is misleading, for, if we focus only on the resuscitation of rhetoric and not on that resuscitation as a critical gesture, we are missing the greater part of Nietzsche’s meaning. This misperception is a calculated part of Nietzsche’s purpose and a key element of his seductiveness. Coming to grips with these evasions is what makes reading Nietzsche so uniquely difficult and so hazardous an undertaking. Otherwise, rhetoric—the search for the “genesis” of significance, the “body” of language, or even its tropological system—risks becoming the postulation of a fetish-object that exists somehow independently of the rhetoric of Nietzsche’s own language that conveys his ostensible theory of rhetoric. How can we read Nietzsche’s theory of rhetoric and at the same time view it rhetorically? This is one of the greatest challenges of his writings, but as we shall see, only a philological approach can help to solve this problem.
II. Figures of Speech and Thought, Bodily Inscribed

Die Physiologie demonstriert es ja besser! (KSA 13.338)

From even before his early lectures on Greek metrics (1870/71) to the late fragments, Nietzsche is generally given over to a theory of gestural language, language conceived of as corporeal inflection and “externality” (Geberden, Leiblichkeit, Aeusserung; cf. EH IV.4; WP 809). The concept of gesture covers without opposing vocality (“the whole reach of the consonantal and the vocalic”), and both are intimately connected with what functions as a register of their material difference, rhythmos, “that force which reorders all the atoms of the sentence, bids one choose one’s words with care, and gives one’s thoughts a new color, making them darker, stranger, and more remote” (GS 84). This “rhythming of speech” (Rhythmisierung der Rede) is an atomization, pulverization, and a reconfiguration of language. Gesture asserts itself at the level of the word—and indeed at all levels of discourse—as the alternation of stylistic differences, as a series of modulations and modifications. “Life betrays its variety in a wealth of gestures,” and so does writing: “One must learn to feel the length and brevity of sentences, the interpunctuation, the selection of phrases, the pauses, the sequence of the arguments—as gestures” (KSA 10.22)—just as “all movements [of any kind whatsoever] have to be conceived of as gestures, as a kind of language” (KSA 12.16 [1885/6]). Rhythm, consequently, marks these differences with the non-mark of their own difference, as their intermittence, what Nietzsche elsewhere calls Intermittenzformen, “forms of intermittence” (“The Dionysian Worldview,” KSA 1.574). And this rhythm is physiologically diagnosable.

At this point one could cite the description Nietzsche gives to the derivation of concepts from sensation in his essay “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1872/3), or the parallel description in his lecture notes on Greek rhetoric, dating from 1874, but most likely resuming materials presented in an earlier course on the same topic, dating from 1872/3. The point of departure in the latter set of texts is in fact rhythm and the aural properties of language, particularly the contrast, which runs through all of Nietzsche’s philology, between classical literary sensibilities and their modern correlative. The whole of ancient literature is rhetorical in the root sense of the term (“speech”-oriented); its focus is “the ear, in order to captivate it

10. “Das ganze Bereich des Consonantischen und Vokalischen” is said to be gestural (KSA 7.361 [1871]) somewhat along the same lines as those taken by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his account of qualities of letters in terms of the mechanics of phonation (De compositione verborum chap. 14).
The modern sensibility to rhythm, by contrast, has been worn thin by habituation to written forms of communication: “We are much paler and abstracter.” Nietzsche goes on immediately to say, “It is not hard to show that those instruments of conscious art which we refer to as ‘rhetorical’ were always at work as the instruments of unconscious art [als Mittel unbewusster Kunst] in language and its engenderment [Werden]. There is absolutely no unrhetorical ‘naturalness’ to language to which one could appeal: language is itself the result of nothing but rhetorical arts” (R 20/1; trans. adapted).12

With this move, the material possibilities of language, its rhythmos and peculiar temporality, receive an amazing authorization: they are driven deeply into the very structure and form of language, running from expression down to its embedded grammar (itself a result of figuration [R 24/5]), and from there down to the basic level of sensations (Empfindungen) and their underlying neural stimulation (Nervenreiz), at which point “communication” no longer applies—although “rhetoric” continues to apply. This process, which trades one kind of naturalness for another, needs to be explored briefly.

What is a word? Nietzsche’s answer strikes us as extreme: “The image of a neural excitation in sounds” (TL 248/878; trans. adapted). What is truth? Here Nietzsche’s answer is, by contrast, reassuringly familiar: a massive and systematic falsification, “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations that were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned . . .” (TL 250/880; trans. adapted). But these two arguments, the one “extreme,” the other (by now) “familiar,” are not unconnected. For, Nietzsche adds, our metaphors, worn thin by overuse, have lost their sensory impact; they are “sinnlich kraftlos geworden,” “powerless” to be registered (again) at their original place of origin, the senses (TL 250/880; trans. adapted). One of Nietzsche’s aims in his essay “On Truth and Lying” is to replenish the sensory dimensions of concepts and words—their palpability and their defining (negative) trait, their derivation out of that to which they universally stand opposed, sensation: concepts take on sensuous contours (“the concept, bony and eight-sided like a die, and equally susceptible of motion”).13 Words are made “mobile” again. And the relation that binds together the various “stages” in the pro-

12. Pagination refers to the facing German and English text and translation (frequently adapted) of the lectures on classical rhetoric (R) as printed in Gilman et al. 1989. Accompanying references to “Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” (TL) will be to Blaire’s translation in Gilman et al.1989 and to the German text in KSA vol. 1.

13. TL 251/882. Thought is ultimately in the realm of “appearances,” and eo ipso enjoys a materiality; cf. KSA 7.208: “We behold thought as we do the body [Wir schauen das Denken an wie den Leib]”; 7. 130: “It is clear that all appearances are material.”
cess leading “up” from sensation to concept-formation is reaffirmed, à la Friedrich Albert Lange (one of Nietzsche’s major influences from 1866 on), as an “aesthetic” one:14 “For between two absolutely different spheres such as subject and object there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an aesthetic behavior [ein ästhetisches Verhalten], I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign language” (TL 252/884). Nietzsche invites us to relive this aesthetic process in all its sensuous fragility and uncertainty.15

Nietzsche’s premise is that language is derived from a series of discontinuities that are nonetheless translatable one into another, but at a price: contents are lost at each stage along the way. Language (for example, spoken sound) is materially heterogeneous [ein Fremdes] to sensation: “How can an act of the soul be presented by an aural image [Tonbild]?” Sensation is in turn a summation of nerve impulses, which are incommunicable (but can be felt), as are the sensations (whose contents can only be “copied”). What makes the process rhetorical, in addition to being aesthetic, is that, with causes beyond the reach of cognition, this sequence traces the effects of an effect, of a Wirkung, “that which makes an impression [Eindruck]” in the classical, Aristotelian sense of “rhetoric” (R 20/1). But additionally there is a selectivity to this process: We do not register every effect that makes an impact on us, but only certain kinds of effect; our perception of the world is partial (synecdochal) and even inverted (metonymical). We grasp parts as though they were wholes; we take effects for causes. Finally, if rhetoric, again classically, is whatever instills in us, not knowledge (epistēmē), but belief and opinion (doxa), then our entire relation to the world has to be described as irretrievably one of doxa. All language is in this sense figurative, which is to say, the result of figuration, understood in the broadest possible way.

Nietzsche is not reducing language to a figure of rhetoric. At the very least, he is overwriting, or rather complicating, one rhetoric through another—the rhetoric of the schools (the formal techniques of manipulating words through verbal substitutions) and the rhetoric of the body (the transpositions that occur between sensation and conception). Prima facie, his theory is physiological; and this physiology of rhetoric is not “grounded in the rhetorical structure of tropes,” as some recent critics would have it,16

14. See Lange 1866.
15. Heidegger’s response to this aspect of Nietzsche’s aesthetics (its grounding, “physiological” aspect) is the obvious one, but it is far too literal-minded: “This is a chemical description, but scarcely a philosophical interpretation” (Heidegger 1961: 136).
16. de Man 1979: 123. De Man’s views are for the most part typical of the French reception of Nietzsche in the 1970s and 1980s.
because it is not ultimately grounded in any way; rather, it is grounded in nothing but its own polemical and rhetorical purpose. Formally speaking, the theory must be a species of the *doxa* it describes; however, it is wrong to assume that the theory is exhausted by its own formal, self-decomposing logic. The sensualistic derivation of rhetoric remains polemically in place, whatever opinions about this process we may form, and it remains in place not least in the rendering of rhetoric (Nietzsche’s own, for instance) into something sensual, not to say sensationalistic. If his theory is a piece of *doxa*, by the same token his language is now an extension of the processes it describes; you cannot take on board the premise without taking on its consequence too. There seems to be no exit from this vicious circle.

Nietzsche’s theory of figuration represents, we might say, a material disfiguring of rhetoric, however we wish to conceive this last term. His object is not to build up a theory of persuasion, though he may be justifiably attributed with the opposite project: to foster in his readers a sense of *dissuasion* and disbelief, a certain skepticism towards language, and a defamiliarization with the very ideas of sensuousness and of rhetoric.\(^\text{17}\) Beyond this, rhetoric can no longer be viewed in poststructuralist terms as the “possibility” of reversal in general;\(^\text{18}\) it is just one more effect of a spectrum of indeterminacies, no more explicable than explicating. In dismantling systematically the generalizability of a category like rhetoric, Nietzsche comes down in favor of a much richer declension of specificities, in which the properties of sensation exist as much to undo as to support the properties of rhetoric. This is, after all, one of the lessons of “On Truth and Lying,” namely, that categorical divisions, like all generalizations, are false. At this point, his rhetorical strategy becomes a *tactics*.

Nietzsche’s earliest rhetorical theory tends towards a thoroughly aporetic stance on language, whose characteristics (rhetorical or other) can no longer be equated but only identified with the totality of their preconditions, and whose contingency lies precisely in this loss of control in the face of what exceeds either the properly linguistic, or else any final understandings of what this might amount to. We might compare his theory, as presented here, with de Man’s reading of it: “The deconstruction of the metaphor of knowledge into the metonymy of sensation is a surface manifestation of a more inclusive deconstruction that reveals a metalectic reversal of the categories of

\[\text{\(\text{17}\) Knowledge, Nietzsche knows, is by itself a form of “dissuasion” and a “self-critique.” Nietzsche’s task is simply to mime this feature of knowledge (GM III.25).}\]

\[\text{\(\text{18}\) De Man defines the signal “property of language” as “the possibility of substituting binary polarities” (1979: 108).}\]
anteriority and posteriority, of ‘before’ and ‘after.’” In contrast, Nietzsche’s stance, from even before the lectures on rhetoric to the time of this fragment, is that “the material of the senses [is] adapted by the understanding, reduced to rough outlines, made similar, subsumed under related matters. Thus the fuzziness and chaos of sense impressions are, as it were, logicized” (1887; WP 569). Even if it is true that Nietzsche’s claims are self-subverting, it is not because formal reversals can be said to have replaced the sensuous logic of Nietzsche’s formulation. There is nothing in Nietzsche that would validate some final appeal to a “more inclusive” operation, or to a more powerful register (a deconstructive logic); to affirm the primacy of this logic is to repeat the argument that was to have been displaced, and to reinstate hegemonic categories all over again. Lange had helped Nietzsche formulate a position that would be subversive of its own presuppositions, often by drawing upon the force of sensation (its problematic, stigmatic character): the categories of logic (and a fortiori of rhetoric) are themselves sensations and the product of sensations. Causality is refuted, not because it collapses in a figurative metalepsis, but because it is, at bottom, a feeling or sensation to which we have become accustomed; it is “das Gefühl der Kausalität” (the feeling of causality) transposed onto the “source” of sensation, that gives the lie to the categorical, a priori status of causality. But what is the source of this “feeling”? Pressed for an answer, Nietzsche no doubt would respond: it is in the “tone, strength, modulation, tempo with which a sequence of words [say, a proposition about causality] is spoken—in brief, the music behind the words, the passions behind the music . . . everything, in other words, that cannot be written.” The answer leads us back to the totality of conditions that impinge on the logic of causation, its entire prehistory of symptoms and effects, even if we can never arrive in the end at its real origin or cause, although we can always, and always do, presuppose one after the fact (this is what de Man refers to as “metaleptic reversal”). We should ask ourselves whether we can simply attribute the whole of this process and its cause to language, when language itself figures as one of the results of the process (“language is the result of nothing but rhetorical arts”).

Inveighing against the rubric-like generalizations which concepts are (and the concept of rhetoric, however it is conceived, is scarcely exempt from this either), Nietzsche returns us to the problem of particularities: “Every intuitional metaphor is individual and without equal, and thereby always escapes every attempt to put it under rubrics.” Such resistances, we

20. KSA 7.483; 7.469; R 58/59.
might say, are built into the chain of transcriptions across the spectrum of sensation and language. They do not bring us any closer to what is released in the process (meaning, force) or in the exchange of materialities, but they do make us mindful of these losses. Nietzsche’s “aesthetics” of discourse, his “physiology of aesthetics,” and his associated theory of rhetoric, is thus not an aesthetics of the body, but of the body lost:

For what does man really know about himself? If only he could ever see himself perfectly, as if displayed in an illuminated showcase! Does not nature keep nearly everything secret from him, even about his own body, in order to hold him fast under the spell of a proud, delusory consciousness, unmindful of the windings of his intestines, the swift flow of his bloodstream, the intricate quivering of his tissues! She threw away the key: and woe to the fateful curiosity that would ever succeed in peering through a crack out of the room of consciousness and downward. . . . (TL 247/877)

By satisfying that curiosity in the very same essay and in the lectures on rhetoric (and indeed in this very passage) and by figuring language as the reflex of physiology, Nietzsche is bringing matter back into the picture, upsetting the bloodless abstractions of tropes and figures, and presenting their origins in a schematism that operates at a primary level of a first, and at first unconscious, “repression”: the translation of physical stimuli into (subjective) sensations, in a language of signs that inaudibly gives our more familiar language its first determination. That determination is hopelessly lost to us, forever, but it is a loss that is nonetheless felt. It is a most poignant theory, and as a theory it would seem to be practically all in vain—were it not for historical precedents. Nietzsche is not reaching after the body, pure and simple. He is cultivating an image of the body that stems from classical antiquity itself.

III. Classical Rhetoric and Gustav Gerber’s *Die Sprach als Kunst*

The physiological determination of language, of figures of speech and thought, and the consequent claim that all language is figured, is not something whimsically imposed from modernity and by Nietzsche upon the body in his lectures on classical rhetoric. It is a historically traceable component of classical rhetoric itself, even if it represents only a strand, and often a countertendency, within the classical tradition stamped by Plato and espe-
cially by Aristotle. The distinction between figured and unfigured discourse is commonly put into question in the eclectically constituted rhetorical tradition (e.g., by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ars rhetorica* chap. 9 [λόγος ἀσχημάτιστος]; Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.1.12), but perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in a remarkable excerpt from the polemics of Alexander Numenius, an obscure rhetor from the mid-first century C.E.

In this text devoted to a general classification of figures (*On Figures of Thought and Speech*),²¹ Alexander must at the outset defend the difference between figured (rhetorical) and unfigured (lay) discourse against unnamed opponents: “Some say that figures have no distinctive and proper feature (οὐδὲν ἔχειν τὸ σχῆμα τῆς διανοίας), for no unfigured discourse (λόγον ἀσχημάτιστον) can easily be found.” The argument goes beyond the disproof that no unfigured language can be found, which is a large claim in itself. It is also grounded in empirical necessity, for the mind, being in constant motion and as that which gives language its forms, “takes on many shapes (lit.: “figurations,” σχηματισμούς), e.g., when it defines, reproves, takes counsel, or does or experiences any one of the things which happens to it,” while language, being a mere copy (μίμημα) of the mind cannot help but reflect these configurations in its own shape. The psychology on which this argument is based could easily be Stoic. But it is impossible to tell the provenience of the theory, which for all we know is an *ad hoc* invention of its author. No known Stoic, let alone Stoicizing, theory of rhetoric even comes close to matching it. All we have is this capsule formulation of the theory, which is endlessly fascinating regardless of its possible school affiliations.

Nietzsche would have had a first-hand acquaintance with this text through Spengel’s edition of Greek rhetorical writings, *Rhetores Graeci* (1856), which he knew and used. But he would also have had access to it through Gustav Gerber’s discussion of the passage in his work in two volumes, *Die Sprache als Kunst* (1871 and 1873),²² a study that itself appears to be indebted in part to Lange or at least to be breathing in the same post-Kantian atmosphere, and a study from which Nietzsche is known to have borrowed some of his most radical and central formulations—the most famous being the statement, clearly congenial to Nietzsche’s Langean persuasions, that all language is an aesthetic figuration, and the most intriguing being the discovery of “die unbewußt schaffende Kunst,” “the unconsciously productive art” that is the essence of language (in Nietzsche’s paraphrase, that which makes language

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“an unconscious art”). As the sequel will show, the extent of Nietzsche's borrowings in his reflections on rhetoric goes much deeper than has been suspected, and they take him far beyond Gerber—as well as beyond any interpretation of Nietzsche that reduces language to a formal tropology.

“Eigentlich ist alles Figuration, was man gewöhnlich Rede nennt,” “Everything that we usually call discourse is actually figuration” (R 24/5). Gerber's original words read, “That everything we usually call discourse is actually figuration is something into which the ancients had an abundant insight, as will be discussed below.” Far from being the mere product of a post-Humboldtian world, Gerber's most radical insights, like the bulk of his examples, are themselves in fact borrowed from ancient rhetorical handbooks and drawn from the materials of the Greek language. Instances were indeed abundantly in evidence in the ancient literature. In the passage from Alexander above, language follows the movements of the mind; all that is lacking is a theory of the mind's movements under a physiological description, but that connection was readily available from, say, the derivation in atomism of linguistic and perceptual conventions from natural events; and Democritus, after all, was in Nietzsche's own words, “the Humboldt of the ancient world” (BAW 3, 364), a point that he went on to pursue at great length in his lectures and writings (both published and unpublished). On this materialist psychology, there is a basic sense in which all language is a matter of figuration, literally a reconfiguration of the materials of sensation and an arrangement of atoms. The logic of incommensurability, obtaining between external realities, subjective sensation, conceptualization and

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23. Gerber 1873:1.392. Cf. 1.303 (critiquing Kant's divorce of sensuality and reason, based on Hamann's arguments to this effect). Gerber boasts himself to be mounting, in a phrase borrowed from Jacobi, “a critique of language.”

24. For an unconvincing attempt to trace Nietzsche's ideas on the rhetoricity of language exclusively back to Gerber, see Meijers 1988 and Meijers and Stingelin 1988. A profitable lesson may be drawn from a comparison with Nietzsche's essay “The Dionysian Worldview,” especially section 4, which anticipates many of Gerber's ideas on the intrinsically symbolic (in Gerber's terms “figurative”) nature of language, the relative and positional value of sound (vis-à-vis its symbolic status) and even of meaning (vis-à-vis its context, der Satz). Nietzsche's view evolves partly in reaction to Hartmann. Cf. KSA 7.65 (3[18]); cf. 7.63–64 (3[15–16]), and esp. 60 (3[20]); the entries date back to 1869–70. Eduard Hanslick's ideas about the symbolic character of music in relation to language (e.g., Hanslick 1865: 21–23) are no doubt a further influence.


27. See Porter 2000, esp. chs. 1–2.

28. There are differences within this tradition. The Democritean impulse, present even in the Epicurean system, lies in this direction, as is shown by a series of Democritean fragments and Epicurus' On Nature, Bk. 28. (See David Sedley's edition of this text in Sedley 1973).
expression, is implied (we might say, rhetorically so) by the contrast that
the atomistic view of language brings shockingly to the fore (language is
analogous to atoms rearranged, sounds are but streaming atomic films). It
is arguably the incommensurability between verbal concepts and things (to
make this simplification) more than the specifics of any one mental psychol-
ogy that is the most astonishing feature of all the conventionalist ancient
accounts. (That reported by Alexander above, we might note, is not plainly
naturalistic, since it is not clear whether or how the affections of the mind
correspond to real objects in the world; at most, they might correspond to
the impact of these objects on the mind, which is also the case in atomism.)
The same insight, likewise clothed in an empirical psychology, is made into
an excruciating aporia of logic in the fragments of Gorgias of Leontini, a
flashy rhetorician who took up quarters in Athens around the time that
Socrates and Democritus were flourishing. Gorgias’s thesis is particularly
relevant because it turns on the paradox that if language communicates at
all, it communicates not “things,” external realities with which it has no
measurable relation, but only itself. Words, on this view, are mere Lautbilder,
or material images of sound.

Both aspects—the physiological derivation of language’s figures and the
incommensurability of language to reality and vice versa—are present in Ger-
ber’s and Nietzsche’s accounts; but it might be fair to say that in Gerber these
two aspects coexist in peaceful harmony, whereas in Nietzsche they coexist
in an unstable tension, as perhaps they should. For Gerber, language, once
it is formed, ceases to be physiologically relevant. The material properties
of language (euphony, alliteration, rhythm) receive at best perfunctory treat-
ment in his study; they have no critical function and no contrastive purpose;
they contain no threats, and they do not, in any case, go past the surface
features of sound. Sounds constituted in language may have the status of
“things” in the world, but they are the peculiar product of human creativity, a
“property of the soul,” an appropriated reality—one that is unproblematically
and comfortably anthropocentric. This (neo-Kantian) insight into anthrop-
ocentrism, however inextricable the condition is held to be, occasions no
further probing, no doubts of any kind for Gerber, whose title spells out the
exact borders of his study: language and art.

Finally, and most surprisingly of all, the striking claims about the fun-

29. See Gerber 1873: 1.291, 337.
30. For discussion, see Porter 1993.
33. “aus dieser Welt kann [der Mensch] nicht heraus” (Gerber 1873: 1.160).
damentally tropic nature of language are subsequently watered down by the reintroduction of a “relative” contrast between so-called “aesthetic figures” (these are consciously applied enhancements of the materials of language) and “naïve tropes” (unconscious figurations). Here, surprisingly, Gerber sides with Alexander Numeniu against his anonymous opponents, in holding to a proper, central meaning of “figure.”34 In the end, Gerber will deny outright that figures of thought have any meaningful existence,35 while the unconscious figurative mechanisms of language are permitted to recede into relative unimportance. “The genesis [Entstehung] of verbal artworks cannot be explained by appealing to a mechanism that works unconsciously,” he writes.36 Stripped of explanatory or even diagnostic value, Gerber’s thesis that “language is art” has lost its original and radical force. Perhaps the most striking sign of this trend, and of Nietzsche’s distance from Gerber, is Gerber’s insistence that the categories of the aesthetic and the rhetorical are fundamentally to be held apart and distinct: “aesthetic” figures have no rhetorical function “because they do not aim at rhetorical effects or the production [Erregung] of affect; rather, they spring from the formative impulse of fantasy . . . and they produce something beautiful.”37 This is nothing but aesthetic Kantianism.

Nietzsche, by contrast, appears to take Lange’s physiological Kantianism to heart and à la lettre. Nietzsche’s compression and selection of details in his lectures on rhetoric makes for a closer linkage than even Gerber would have liked to have seen between the initial stages of stimulus and sensation and the final stages of expression. That connection is even more prominent in the roughly contemporaneous essay “On Truth and Lying” (which was mentioned briefly above). Nietzsche’s investigations into ancient rhythm had, moreover, already revealed the physiological imperatives of rhythm; these are developed along a parallel but somewhat different axis in the linguistic speculations of “The Dionysian Worldview” (1870). Applying these insights

34. Gerber 1873: 1.345, 358–59; 2.4–5, 21ff. (aesthetic/naïve); 2.15 (arguing “with” Alexander that “the concept of the figure is obliterated” when, for instance, emotional states are “uncritically” portrayed and reckoned as figures).

35. “Figuration of thought is in itself non-sense” (Gerber 1873: 2.19). Nietzsche would have been able to infer this conclusion from the first volume. (The relative dates of his lecture notes and of his acquaintance with Gerber’s second volume are unclear, but this uncertainty is immaterial to my argument.)

36. Gerber 1873: 2.7.

37. Gerber 1873: 2.14; cf. 1.358–59. This difference is critically overlooked by Meijers, who is too keen to eliminate Lange from the picture and replace him with Gerber as the true source of Nietzsche’s language theory. But Lange is not the immediate or sole inspiration either. Perhaps we should just allow Nietzsche to be what he for the most part is, a contrary spirit, who reads and interprets as he pleases.
to oratory was a logical step, particularly with respect to the rhetorical view of language as a material that awaits reshaping in the hands of the orator, whose art is that of rhythmical modulation. The orator “rhythms” his or her language, and his or her audience, by exercising a feeling for style [das Stilgefühl] that demands a modified expression in each case, roughly the way the same rhythm runs through a musical composition unimpaired, though within it the most delicate modifications are necessary. The characteristic style [viz., style adapted to the circumstances and character of the situation at hand] is the proper domain of the art of the orator: here he practices a free plastic art; the language is his material lying ready to hand. (R 34/5; trans. adapted)

Language is gestural because it is figurative. This is the ancient rhetorical derivation of the meaning of schēmata, though one Nietzsche would hesitate to call its “proper” sense (R 66/7). His position is fundamentally that of Alexander Numenius’s opponents, and it reflects a more rigorous application of their principle: “No expression determines and delimits a movement of the soul with such rigidity that it could be regarded as the actual statement of the meaning” (R 66/7). In other words, if any motions of the soul are a figuration, then all such motions are only fluid, not proper, expressions of themselves. This line of argument has self-destructive implications, which will be discussed further below.

IV. “Hypocrisy”

The corporeal dimension of language and its use is the explicit topic of a subsequent section (“The Rhythm of Discourse,” R 82/3), but it figures forth whenever attention is paid to the aural characteristics of discourse, written or spoken, or to oral and theatrical delivery, as in the section with which Nietzsche brings his lectures to a close, on the same note from which he set out:

Hypokrisis [delivery]. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, it is divided into πάθη τῆς φωνῆς καὶ σχήματα τοῦ σῶματος [modulations (affections) of the voice and gestures (figures) of the body]. The Romans called it actio or pronuntiatio: according to Cicero the eloquence of the body, vocis et motus (gestus), acting on the ear and eyes of the listener, is very important: a mediocre speech, recommended by a strong delivery, carries more
weight than the best one without any help. Demosthenes, when asked what was the most important aspect of the orator’s profession, said (1) delivery; (2) delivery; (3) delivery. As for the voice, what matters most is its naturalness, and secondly, the way it is used. Range, strength and endurance, suppleness, and timbre [Klangfarbe]. A good, sonorous, smooth vocal apparatus [Organ] must provide variety by its mode of delivery, in order to avoid monotony. Then gestures and physical posture [Körperhaltung]. The position of the head should be natural and erect. During the proof it is bowed somewhat forward together with the entire body. Gestures must never become pantomimes or living statues of body positions. A remarkable description [can be found] in Quintilian ([Inst.] 11.3). (R 164–66; trans. adapted)

“A period in the classical sense is above all a physiological unit, insofar as it is held together by a single breath.” (BGE 247; emphasis added). For Nietzsche, recuperating the physiological origins of language means, in ways that it does not for Gerber, retrieving them at every stage, offsetting the inevitable material losses of the medium (along the pathways of sensation leading to concept-formation) with newfound substitutes and a restored “good health” (R 38/9–40/1). The health is of the body: this is the kind of beauty—a robustly physiological one—that Nietzsche can oppose to Gerber’s aestheticization of rhetoric. By replenishing language with what one might wish to call the “impurities” of its (debased and debasing) physical origins (for “in and of itself there is neither a pure nor an impure discourse,” [R 26/7]), Nietzsche is in effect providing a genealogical framework for describing, in a deliciously critical way, the current state of the language. “Who knows how many barbarisms have worked in this way to develop the Roman language out of Latin? And, it was through these barbarisms and solecisms that the good rule-bound French came about!” (R 26/7; emphasis added). In reading into the present the preconditions of the linguistic “past,” historically and physiologically speaking, Nietzsche is able to apply Gerber’s logic more consequentially than Gerber had himself: “Thus, the popular tropes originated from embarrassment and stupidity, the rhetorical tropes from art and delight.” With this last remark, Nietzsche captures the essence of Gerber’s distinction between naive (indoctae) and aesthetic (doctae) figures. The sequel, however, tells decisively against Gerber, in the spirit of Gerber’s own, more radical (but wavering) insight: “This is an entirely false contrast” (R 52/3; emphasis added).

In “On Truth and Language” Nietzsche holds the primary relation of language to reality to be an “aesthetic” one. And the “genealogy” proposed there is likewise calculated to vanish, or rather slowly fade away, in favor
of a more embarrassing, because uncertain, question about the persistence of barbarisms in the current refinements of language. The pure essence of language, its *Wesen*, Nietzsche is suggesting, is already materially contaminated, and irretrievably so, with the phenomenality of appearances, and most symptomatically, with acoustic appearance (volume). It is this audibility (this is the full meaning of “rhetorical”) or phenomenality (the full meaning of “aesthetic”) embedded in language—even when it is written—which constitutes its nature or essence.

Language is the result of nothing but rhetorical arts. The power [*Kraft*]—what Aristotle calls rhetoric—to discover and to make valid, with respect to everything, that which has an effect and makes an impression is at the same time the essence of language. Language is just as little related to truth, the essence of things, as is rhetoric; its object is not instruction, but conveying to others a subjective excitation [*Erregung*] and its acceptance. (R 20/1; trans. adapted)

The key terms are all translations from Greek, although their values have been shifted. Taking Aristotle’s label for the *technē* of rhetoric, namely *dynamis* (faculty, capacity), and tying it more closely to a problematics of power and force (*Kraft*), Nietzsche is rewriting the classical definition of rhetoric and its conditions of possibility. In contesting these conditions, Nietzsche is also revisioning the history of classical rhetoric. The first of the lectures, “The Concept of Rhetoric,” in fact, offers an interesting, because critical, overview of the historical progression of rhetoric. Passing from Plato’s disparagement of rhetorical technique (it is recognized to be valuable only as strapped in the harness of philosophical truth [R 8/9]) to the promotion, by Aristotle, of rhetorical *dynamis* as a full-fledged *technē*, Nietzsche is clear about where his own interests lie—namely, in the common point of convergence between philosophy and rhetoric. For Plato and Aristotle, the rhetorical *dynamis* was neither a cognitive skill (*epistēmē*) nor a technique (*technē*) but rather a power that could be elevated to a *technē*, if not a cognition (R 8/9). At this early stage, Nietzsche has not yet explicitly refashioned the classical concept of *dynamis* into the essence of language’s mechanisms, but his criticisms of Aristotle in particular are intelligible only in the light of subsequent arguments. They are also penetrating.

Despite improving on Plato’s narrow acceptance of the oratorical art, Aristotle’s rhetoric remained, Nietzsche sighs, *eine rein formale Kunst*, an art defined in purely formal terms, to the exclusion of what we might call its *material* conditions of possibility. “Endlich wichtig das θεωρῆσαι,” “At
bottom, theoretical knowledge is what counts [for Aristotle]” (R 10/11; trans. adapted). In Aristotle’s view it suffices to know in theory, through a pure mental vision (a *theōrein*), “that which renders an argument plausible [the possible means of persuasion],” “Es genügt τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον πιθανόν zu erkennen, zu schauen [sc. θεωρῆσαι].” Quoting from Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric (*Rhet.* 1.2, 1355b25–26), Nietzsche is also dilating upon its implications, starting with the rarefied duplication of “the possible”: the faculty of persuasion, the *dynamis*, is knowing the possible means of persuasion, τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον πιθανόν (Nietzsche will later attack Kant on similar grounds, for justifying the “possibility” of *a priori* judgments by appealing tautologously to the “faculty” of reason for which such judgments are “possible” [möglich]; BGE 11). With Aristotle, *inventio* (the possibility, if you like, of discovering persuasive possibility) defines and exhausts the rhetorical *dynamis*, both as faculty and as object; together the two aspects of rhetoric, the “possible” as faculty and object, constitute its circular conditions of possibility. Meanwhile, Nietzsche ruefully observes, *elocutio, dispositio, memoria, pronuntiatio* are laid aside as secondary, even dispensable, items because now they only formally flow out of the definition that Aristotle gives to rhetoric.

In point of fact, Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* does slight these topics, which happen (as we saw) to be the subjects to which Nietzsche’s own treatment will return at the close of his lectures, under the heading of “delivery” (*hypokrisis*). Nietzsche pursues the logic of his critique a step further:

Aristotle probably wishes delivery to be viewed not as essential but only as accidental [to the essence of rhetoric; *als Accidens*]: for he views the rhetorical as one finds it in handbooks (just as he also isolates in his mind the effect of drama as independent from the performance, and thus does not take up in its definition the question of physical presence [das sinnliche Erscheinung, “sensuous appearance”] on stage). (R 10/11; trans. adapted)

Nietzsche’s criticism strikes at a genuine vulnerability in Aristotle. The link with drama and the *Poetics* is doubly justified: for rhetoric comprises, among other things, the art of delivery, which is to say “acting” (*hypokritikē*; cf. R 34/5, where Nietzsche gives this a profound twist: the rhetor “speaks like an actor who plays a role unfamiliar to him or in an unfamiliar situation”; cf. KSA 7.312 (9[105])); and second, Aristotle’s theories of rhetoric and poetics (drama) are founded on a common formalistic assumption, which scants the material and phenomenal dimensions (especially the performative aspects) of both speeches and plays. Compare an entry from 1869/70 (a fragment from the drafts towards *The Birth of Tragedy*): “Against Aristotle, who counts
ὄψις [spectacle] and μέλος [music] only among the ἡδύσματα [pleasurable garnishing] of tragedy: and already here he sanctions the Lesedrama” (KSA 7.78). The physical embodiments of tragic drama, sight and sound, are last on Aristotle’s list of tragic components; lexis, or linguistic expression, is likewise of lesser interest; and Aristotle does, after all, famously hold that Oedipus Rex read produces the same effects as does Oedipus Rex beheld on the stage. All of these factors are subordinated, like so many peripheral circumstances, to the formal structure of the play’s action, which, at the limit, needn’t be performed at all.38 Nietzsche’s critique extends along similar lines to rhetoric, because Aristotle’s logic is the same here, too. The possibility of persuading, being “contained” already in the concept of the pithanon (the potentially plausible), needn’t ever be actualized, once it is formally secured. “That is why every artificial means of pronuntiatio is to be made equally dependent upon this pithanon,” Nietzsche observes. “Only the very act of speech [elocutio] is no longer necessary” (nur eben das λέγειν ist nicht nothwendig,” R 10/11). And what is rhetoric without speech?

Here something quite remarkable stands out: Nietzsche’s point is not just that rhetoric (or tragedy, for that matter) is not merely a conceptual, contemplative genre. It is that power and performance, and a certain materiality, must be incorporated into the very formal conditions of possibility of language (das Wesen der Sprache), at which point the clash that results destroys the very idea of “conditions of possibility” as a formal or transcendental concept: Either such conditions are a tautology (the possibility of their possibility), as above or in Kant (vermöge eines Vermögens, BGE 11); or they are a vanishing point of constitutional excessiveness, and as such indicate not a capacity, but an incapacity. “Not being able to contradict is proof of an incapacity [Unvermögen], not of ‘truth’” (WP 515). Either way, reading these conditiones sine quibus non entails detailed cultural analysis and critique, not formal postulation: there are no conditions of possibility in any pure sense. Nietzsche’s own theory of rhetoric will thus supplement and complete the tendencies of classical rhetoric. The cognitive activity of language is inextricable from the effects of the dynamis that it always was, and from the sensuous appearance (sinnliches Erscheinen) that Aristotle banned from the conditions of language. The historical progression towards a greater tolerance

38. On the extreme formalism of Aristotle, see Halliwell 1986, Appendices 3 and 4. If Aristotle seeks to separate text and performance, Nietzsche’s view is that a text (like any thing) is equivalent only to its performances ([re]activitations, effects, [mis]readings, viewings, and interpretations)—which are not its “realizations” in an Aristotelian sense. See Alexander Nehamas’s discussion of the doctrine that “a thing is the sum of its effects” (Nehamas 1985, ch. 3, and, for example, p. 75, where the following is quoted from Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks 5: “The whole nature of reality lies wholly in its acts [Wirken],” a view that Nietzsche here associates with Heraclitus and with materialism).
of the technical dimensions of rhetoric, as traced by Nietzsche in his treatise, constitutes in fact a countermovement, which goes against the tide of ancient rhetorical speculation, and even constitutes a regression of sorts. “Theory,” once it is exposed as a trope, returns to its physiological ground—as neural excitation (Reiz), lodged deeply in the unconscious layers of the body.

Rhetoric is “speech” through and through. It is the performativity, and not just possibility, of discourse. Nor can it be detached from the neural sensations that (somehow) entail it or that it entails (rather than causes). By an intriguing inversion, Nietzsche shows that form (the form of discourse) is merely the material limit of a body, while so-called formal conditions are despite themselves ultimately “about” the materializations that thrust form onto a limit. By forcing the phenomenal and material levels into the formal levels, he introduces a category mistake into Aristotle’s notion of conditions of possibility, thereby eschewing their classical opposition. Of course, the combined gesture of bringing the body into rhetoric, into its conditions of possibility, and of bringing rhetoric into the center of language and thought is meant to be an impossible condition upon the nature of rhetoric and an affront to the classical tradition that it both contumaciously gainsays and hyperbolically extends.

Rhetoric is only one name for this multiple inversion, which is more than a formal reversal, because Nietzsche’s strategy lies as much in his attack on the theoretical status of form (and hence, on various kinds of formalism) as it does in his putting into question the status of the figure and the nature of figuration (schéma as bodily gesture and linguistic trope). Rhetoric in the end is reducible not to a trope or figure, nor even to the generalizability of tropes, though its definition is, in effect, consequent upon a general collapsing of figuration, which can no longer support the classical system of figures, and not even its most recent poststructuralist rehabilitation. Hence the improbability of the claim put forward by one of the latter’s exponents, namely, that “nonverbal acts, if such a thing were to be conceivable, are of no concern to [Nietzsche], since no act can ever be separated from the attempt at understanding, from the interpretation, that necessarily accompanies and falsifies it.”

The logic here is incomplete. Because no act of understanding can be separated from the act it seeks to understand, nonverbal acts are very much a concern for Nietzsche, in particular those nonverbal acts which accompany utterance or writing and thereby falsify a purely verbal and formalized understanding of language, and especially those which define, metaphorically, the “language of the senses,” or Sinnensprache. The senses are

endowed, for Nietzsche, with a primitive interpretive function and an unconscious tropology, for “it is tropes, not unconscious inferences, on which our sensory perceptions rest [Tropen sind’s, nicht unbewusste Schlusse, auf denen unsere Sinneswahrnehmungen beruhen],” and with which they are in fact identical (KSA 7.487; cf. 13.258–59). By this, Nietzsche means to challenge the commonest premises about both rhetoric and sensation (physiology). However, Nietzsche is not reducing sensation neatly to rhetoric. Rather, he is putting into question all valorizations and primacies, across a complex field of variable elements, each with multiple and contradictory associations (as, for instance, rhythm, language, sensation, representation, and rhetoric itself). There are no simple reversals in Nietzsche because there are no pure elements to be reversed. Rhetoric and the physiology with which it is inextricably bound up cannot be conceptualized with a “clear conscience”: the theory of each of these is inseparable from Nietzsche’s largest and ever ongoing polemics with various forms of reductionism. They are poses and postures, not positive doctrines. Indeed, they are the nemesis of any declarative understandings of their subject-matter.

To study physiology with a clear conscience, one must insist that the sense organs are not phenomena [Erscheinungen] in the sense of idealistic philosophy; as such they could not be causes! Sensualism, therefore, at least as a regulative hypothesis, if not as a heuristic principle.

What? And others even say that the external world is the work of our organs? But then our body, as a part of this external world, would be the work of our organs! But then our organs themselves would be—the work of our organs! It seems to me that this is a complete reductio ad absurdum, assuming that the concept of a causa sui is something fundamentally absurd. Consequently, the external world is not the work of our organs—? (BGE 15)

Nietzsche’s hedging and unfinished thought are characteristic of his resistance to simple solutions. He probably means no more than to lay bare the difficult conjunction of ideas he has produced for us. The last question of this quote is therefore not quite rhetorical, because it has a rhetorical purpose, part of which is to unsettle any final certainties we may believe we have, and part of which serves to remind us that Nietzsche’s writings often reflect a physiology conducted in bad conscience, hypocritically: physiology is less a cause than a symptom to be diagnosed; but neither is it eliminable as a factor. Nietzsche’s earliest reflections on language and rhetoric are only one example of Nietzsche’s mauvais fois.
V. Conclusion: Caveat lector

Above I mentioned that Nietzsche’s borrowings and allusions in his lectures on rhetoric go beyond Gerber to unexpected sources. One of these sources is Kant. The formal resemblances that can be traced between Kant’s “schematism,” that “concealed art [verborgene Kunst]” to which Kant devotes a central chapter of the first Critique (B 176), and Nietzsche’s own “unconscious art” (unbewusste Kunst, here taken from Gerber), which is hinted at and named throughout his entire oeuvre, are astonishingly close, but it will be impossible to examine these connections here. Were there time, one might also compare Nietzsche’s parodic inversion of Kant’s schematism in an early writing, presumably a draft of a never completed or included section to The Birth of Tragedy (it is placed by Mette among the papers to “Socrates and Greek Tragedy”), and formerly known under the heading, “On Word and Music” (KSA 7.359–69, written in the spring of 1871). The topic of this piece is the origins of language, which Nietzsche familiarly locates in an “indecipherable” region that nonetheless gives rise to tonality and then to gesture and finally to words. In an idiom that is indebted to Schopenhauer and that Nietzsche will never entirely reject, language (all discourse) is a translation and preservation, in another medium, of the “movement and appearance” of the “will”—its material embodiment. This commotion, rippling through words, emerges in a pulsating intermittence, be it in the form of a rhythmical tempo, of a tonal dynamic, of a harmonic or dissonant relation, or of logic itself (“The Dionysian Worldview,” KSA 1.574–77). It makes no difference to Nietzsche that the source of this motion in language might itself be a projection, whether from within language (this is its idealizing tendency, especially in the face of its own essential incongruousness) or from without (by analogy to empirical motions), or, as is most probably the case, from a combination of the two.

Such Schopenhauerian moments in Nietzsche are always fraught with ambiguity. Schopenhauer gives Nietzsche one pretext to volatilize the concept of “language,” but not the only pretext. What is language? We have already seen how Nietzsche takes pains, in “On Truth and Lying,” to give us as alienating a reply to the question as the imagination, guided by scientific “rigor,” is capable of offering. Schopenhauer suggests another: language is a most misleading word because it represents a halt in the rhythmical flow of the movements (of the will) that pulsate through the words we use (and so, too, is the word language itself made to tremble). But these are only two possibilities, and they crucially overlook a third: Nietzsche’s own use of language. Provocatively, we might say that Nietzsche has no theory
of “language” because such a concept is the very hypostasis that his own performative practice of language would call into question. The same can be said of his so-called “theory of rhetoric,” which represents more than a radicalizing of then current rhetorical theory: it is best viewed as an extension of Nietzsche’s ongoing use of classical philology as a mode of critiquing contemporary (“modern”) culture.40 A further observation on this practice, apropos of Schopenhauerian will, might be useful at this point.

What is essential in the pages on the origin of music and in “The Dionysian Worldview” essay, as well as in everything that Nietzsche wrote that smacks of Schopenhauerianism (from The Birth of Tragedy down to and including the notes on the so-called “will to power”), is the rhetorical duplicity with which he purveys the notion of “will.” The word itself, far from alluding to an originary ground of representation, in fact, covers over its abyss—it is after all nothing but a word (“the one word ‘will,’” BAW 3.353 [in “On Schopenhauer”]), and Nietzsche mimes this complication of origins with his own language, or rather with the rhetoric of his language, which hides what it borrows (by dint of homonymy, or by its appearance of critique) and thereby retracts what it offers at every turn. Nietzsche’s writings reveal themselves as performances, as embodied paradoxes, which subtly undermine their polemical targets, the authors and texts on which his own language is manifestly parasitical (and hence, often indistinguishably different from that of his “interlocutors”). Critique, once it has been so vitiated, is put into place again on a different register, in a drama that is rhetorically played out between Nietzsche and his antagonists (who are pressed into the service of interlocution), or between Nietzsche and his readers (who all too readily assume identificatory postures with respect to the appearances of Nietzsche’s own text). There is no space left to illustrate this ventriloquism here, but our reading of Nietzsche’s rhetoric would be incomplete were we to forget that the performative value of his writings is their rhetorical value, even when rhetoric is no longer the explicit theme.

One of the main points of this animation and dramatization of voices (or voicings) in Nietzsche’s writings (a phenomenon that is more subtle—it transpires, after all, sotto voce—than his assumption of “masks,” which voices also are) is, I take it, that language is uncontrollably historical, overlaid with inheritances, fraught with entanglements and contradictions that are of its nature only to the extent that it has no autonomous nature, but only a history. That history (its “genealogy,” in Nietzsche’s much misused term) is composed, variously, of memory traces and forgetfulnesses, conscious or

40. This notion of philology as cultural critique in Nietzsche is the subject of Porter 2000.
otherwise. Nietzsche’s rhetorical artfulness consists in the attempt to activate as many of these registers as possible at any given time, to awaken their memory, and to implicate both himself and the reader in them. Reading Nietzsche, then, is like a perilous balancing act: one is forever in want of ground on which to stand. For this reason, he makes a singularly poor conceptual ally, although this doesn’t seem to have diminished his appeal in any way. Nietzsche’s theory of tropes, of figures of speech and thought, turns out to be quite alien to our own formal theorization of these things. To follow Nietzsche’s writing, one has perhaps to read Barthes, whose suspectly “retrograde” celebration of voice and of textual pleasure is in fact part of a critique of meaning: “Writing aloud is not expressive . . . it belongs to the geno-text. What it searches for . . . are the pulsional incidents, the patina of consonants . . . : the articulation of the body, of the tongue [langue], not that of meaning, of language [langage]. . . . [I]t granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes.” Or one has to take pleasure in the perilous rhythms of Nietzsche’s texts: “The dangerous delight of the quivering, over-sharp blade that desires to bite, hiss, cut” (BGE 246). Nietzsche’s writings deserve, and in fact need, to be “read aloud.” Only so can a reader’s participation in them become public (cf. BGE 247).

And as for rhetoric—that science which of late has grown so “short of breath”? Nietzsche’s writings contain an implicit program for this, too. If our present-day ideas about difference, figure, and even sense can be made to tremble a little, in the light of the vast tradition that underlies them and that in a sense also gives the lie to them, they shall have been done a minimum of justice.

41. On genealogy, see Porter 2010.
43. Cf. KSA 10.23: “It is impolite and imprudent to preempt the reader in the easier objections. It is very polite and very prudent [klug] to leave it to the reader to express [selber auszusprechen, lit. “to say out loud”] the ultimate quintessence of our wisdom himself.”