The Seductions of Gorgias

SUBLIME RHETORIC

When does rhetorical suasion transcend itself and become sublime? For an answer, we might look to the author of On the Sublime, who in turn would seem to be looking back to Gorgias, when he writes at the outset of his treatise:

Sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. . . . For grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer [ού γάρ εἰς πειθῶ τούς ἁκροσωμένους ἀλλ᾽ εἰς ἐκστάσιν ἀγεί τὰ ύπερφυαί]; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant [πάντη δὲ γε σὺν ἐκπλήξει τοῦ πιθανοῦ καὶ τοῦ πρὸς χάριν ἀεὶ κρατεῖ τὸ θαυμάσιον]. This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force [δυναστείαν καὶ βίαν ἀμαχον] and get the better of every hearer. . . . Sublimity, produced at the right moment [καιρός], tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator’s whole power [δύναμιν] at a single blow.

1.4, trans. Russell (emphases added)

Longinus stands at the far end of the rhetorical tradition; Gorgias, at its origins. The relationship between these two authors is complex and too often neglected,

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but just a few observations are worth making here. In the most general of terms, Longinus and Gorgias agree on the essentials. As D. A. Russell says of Gorgias in another context: “Now the emotional impact of poetry—its power to terrify and sweep us off our feet—is, as Gorgias makes clear, universally acknowledged. Logos in general must then be seen to have the same force.”¹ At the very least, the effects of the rhetor’s logos are for the two authors too close to need comment. Indeed, the language of description used by each is at first glance remarkably similar (εἰς ἕκστασιν ὄγει, ἐξέστησαν [Hel. 17]; σὺν ἐκπλήξει, ἐκπλαγέντες [Hel. 16]; δυναστείαν, δυνάστης μέγας [Hel. 8]; βίαν ἀμαχον, ὀσπερ εἱ βιατήρων βία ἡρπάσθη [Hel. 12, conj. Diels]; καφώς, ἐν τῷ παρόντι χρόνῳ [Hel. 17, Pal. 32; cf. fr. B 13]), and the parallels can be multiplied (cf. the “blows on the mind” inflicted by the rhetor, [Long.] 20.2–3, Hel. 13; discourses that, “filled with the god” [Long.] 13.2, 18.1, Hel. 10, bloom like “beautiful statues,” [Long.] 30.1, Hel. 18; bewitching charms: κηλεύ [Long.] 39.3, γοητεύω Hel. 10; etc.). And even though the gripping, emotional effects of language and the goal of persuasion are for neither author ultimately incompatible, in practice for both the latter tends to be extinguished by the former, just as in the exposition of each theory persuasion proper commands a lesser interest, giving way in Gorgias to its analogies in literature and the senses, the same analogies often taking pride of place in Longinus’s treatise. In the end, the effect of Gorgias’s logos, irrespective of the claims made on its behalf, including those claims made for it by Gorgias himself, is (and always was—historically at least, as we shall see further below) one of “marvel” and “paradox”; and these are for Longinus no less paramount, being the source and vanishing point of all sublimity (1.4; cf. 35.5, τὸ παράδοξον). Longinus, whether he acknowledges it or not, owes a great debt to Gorgias’s original insight into the literary and esthetic ends of rhetoric. Is Gorgias an important and unacknowledged forerunner in the theory of the sublime? The question, intriguing though it may be, is not one that can be gone into here. (Nor are Longinus’s views on the sublime free of complications of their own.) The excursus on Longinus has a much simpler point. It is that persuasion and persuasiveness do not always hold a supreme and unchallenged value in the ancient rhetorical tradition. Nor need they, in principle.²

The point having been made, it is worth noting how differently Gorgias is constructed in the tradition through which he is received today. From Plato to the present, Gorgias of Leontini has enjoyed the reputation of a supreme sophist bent on one end: the “enslavement” of his audiences through persuasion (πειθώ), which is the sum and substance of his art (Plato, Gorgias 452d–53a). Quite apart from the outlandish nature of his claims for his own art and about reality, what is striking about this reception of Gorgias is the continued willingness to credit him

² Cf. [Plut.] De Homero 2.6 (Kindstrand 8, 44): οὐ γὰρ ἄει τὸ πιθανόν ἔπεται, ἐν δὲ τὸ παράδοξον καὶ ἐπημένον πρόχειται.
with a program that he apparently holds but manifestly fails to carry out. From the older handbooks to the more recent scholarly literature one finds accounts that seem to take Gorgias and Plato literally at their word: conjured up in all these accounts is the image of a hearer irresistibly overwhelmed—in theory, that is—by Gorgias’s apagogic and psychagogic persuasions. Gorgias’s own description of his art, in effect, replaces our description of it. “Die Beweise sind vorwiegend in die apagogische Form gefaßt, die den Eindruck der Unentrinnbarkeit macht.”3 “Thus logos is almost an independent external power which forces the hearer to do its will.”4 “Incurably deceptive,” logos has an “enormous power” that acts upon opinion, which is “easy to change.”5

What is puzzling in all this is that the urge to describe or paraphrase Gorgias’s art has caused commentators to overlook the very best witness of it that we have: its enactment, which is to say the performative value of Gorgias’s writings, especially the speeches. For if Gorgias’s literary remains do nothing else, they demonstrate how one can do things with words without being explicit about what is being done (the art of speaking is, after all, an art of silence too [fr. B 6]), even if this means contradicting, performatively, what is being said—as for instance in the statements made so unconvincingly on behalf of the ostensible aim of rhetoric, “persuading the hearer.” Was Gorgias persuasive in practice? Was persuasion even the goal? The figure that the Platonic Gorgias cuts is anything but that of a master of suasion, all his claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Prima facie, there are no grounds for doubting the historical accuracy of Plato’s portrait,6 which instead shows Gorgias unable to offer a convincing definition of rhetoric, deforming the ones he offers with his own example (Socrates is surely no thrall to what he hears), and producing exasperation and bafflement more than any other response in his audience. How straightforward are Gorgias’s definitions of his art, here or anywhere else? His claims to verbal supremacy clearly do not appear to have been matched by his practice. It is a separate question whether they in fact could have been so matched, and a third question whether they were ever intended to be. Gorgias, after all, was renowned for his παράδοξολογία (DK 82 A 1 [Philostr. Vit. soph. 1.9.2]; cf. Isoc. Hel. 1), and he provoked reactions at times much stronger than mere exasperation.7 Persuasion

6. See also Dodds (1959) 9–10.
7. Much of the evidence is anecdotal. The reactions of Isocrates (τοιµασινα, Hel. 3) and Plato are sufficiently representative; Philostratus (DK 82 A 1) and Diodorus (A 4) are deprecating witnesses who attest mainly to his spellbinding novelty. The author of MXG still finds Gorgias’s contradictory arguments objectionable (979a34); and Gorgias was attacked by Antisthenes (Ath. 220c). Gorgias’s stay in Argos is said to have earned him the loathing and censorship of that polis, and a penalty for his pupils (Olympiodorus, In Plat. Gorg. 7.2, p. 51, 16–18 Westerink; Schmid-Stählin (1940) 59 n. 10). His frank amorality (Plat. Gorg. 453a) can only have contributed to his notoriety.
and paradox make strange bedfellows. This was no secret to Longinus. Can Gorgias have been unconscious of their dilemma?

Persuasion but not paradox is what defines the view of Gorgias's theory of deceptive speech that is taken by virtually all his commentators. One influential line on the issue represents a stronger version of the claims put forward by the Platonic Gorgias (but without any reference to Plato's presentation or its implications). Gorgias's sophistic program as it is found, say, in his Encomium of Helen is assumed to embrace the exceptional powers of logos and persuasion.8 The speech itself gives some warrant for this reading: λόγος, after all, is a "powerful lord," a δυνάστης μέγας (8); Helen can be absolved, by words, from charges of crime (which are themselves mere words).9 The linguistic theory implied by Gorgias's philosophical writing appears only to certify the power of logos. There is, for instance, the claim from On Not-Being; or, On Nature that language is self-contained and can convey nothing of what exists outside itself. Since this is so, the argument runs, logos enjoys absolute mastery in its own realm (the sphere of verbal communication); it exists autonomously, in self-confirming isolation, and in a world apart. "Autonomous" and (therefore) utterly given over to the logic of persuasion, logos dominates our psychological reality.

A reading such as this contains unsuspected and possibly insuperable difficulties. To begin with, it must overlook the genuine problem that Gorgias's view of persuasion is, in itself and in the evidence that has survived to attest to it, glaringly unpersuasive. Gorgias's individual arguments in his best-preserved writings, including even those that concern persuasion, tend to unravel one another. His Encomium of Helen is a case in point. If the speech is a demonstration of the overwhelming powers of logos, it is a curiously self-defeating one; and if we are persuaded by Gorgias's claims on behalf of persuasion, this is likely to be owing to a desire on our part to be persuaded, but not thanks to any power that is intrinsic to the speech itself. Indeed, the gap between assertion and application in Gorgias is precisely one of the least analyzed features of the "persuasion thesis," and (I will argue) its greatest barrier.

A second problem with the view just sketched above has to do with the way a contradiction in Gorgias's own thinking is quietly smoothed off. It may be that language can convey nothing of what exists outside itself. But this is properly speaking a limitation on language; it points to a fundamental incapacity of logos, which is difficult to square with the theory of language as power put forward in the Encomium of Helen. Gorgias's rather severe strictures on logos, as these are stated in On Not-Being, are occasionally taken into account, but less so now than they once were. If scholars formerly took pains to reconcile Gorgias's two seem-


9. Translations from Helen are adapted from Kennedy, in Sprague (1972).
ingly incompatible accounts of *logos*, the autonomy thesis seems designed to sidestep their variance in a definitive way. Below I shall try to show how the incompatibility is present where it least ought to appear: in the rhetorical speeches themselves, where the claims to authoritative persuasion have to be weighed against Gorgias’s tacit and open acknowledgments in those same contexts that *logos* has limits that are intrinsic to itself. We would do well to pay closer heed to the dissonances that run through Gorgias’s writings. It may be that Gorgias had two theories of language; perhaps he was confused. Alternatively, Gorgias’s theory of persuasion (to the extent that it is one) might be usefully viewed as the embodiment of a paradox. The theory of persuasion cannot be both self-contained, an end in itself, and be about the self-containment of language, without falling into self-conscious subversion. In other words, the theory cannot be true without being self-canceling.

This is the view that I will be suggesting in what follows below. A more positive account of this paradoxical demolition will be given in the final section of this paper.

There are other difficulties with some of the standard views of Gorgias, and these need to be mentioned briefly. First, the “autonomy thesis,” which appears to flow unimpeded from Gorgias’s writings, ought on several counts to provoke suspicion rather than paraphrases. What is autonomy? One candidate might be freedom from external determination. If so, how absolute is autonomy, and how reciprocal is the relation? If X is (absolutely) autonomous of Y, is Y autonomous of X? It is a thesis that is difficult to get a handle on, in part because, I would claim, the concept of autonomy is not just ambiguous; it is incoherent. In particular, autonomy is a relational concept that *appears* to name a property standing outside all relation. Gorgias, we shall see, was conscious of this problem, and exploited it fully. Second, what is “logos”? To claim that language exists by itself, self-governing and self-constituting, in exchange for its referents in the real, is tantamount to saying that we are immersed in signs and conventions, in a cultural medium that is symbolic and social and from which we can never entirely emerge. In this case, *logos* just is these signs and conventions and the intersubjective realm that embraces them—the content, the medium, and the

10. Cf. Calogero (1977) 262–65. Citations are to the second edition of this work; the essay on Gorgias (chap. 4) is unchanged from its first printing (1932).

11. The resort to “esthetic autonomy” is aimed at protecting Gorgias from subverting his own thesis. See Segal (1962) 119 with n. 82, Verdenius (1981) 125. So is any appeal to truth, for which see Kerferd (1981a: 81–82), who hopes that a deceptive *logos* can nonetheless “get at” the truth (the true reality); but how it can is anything but clear; and, I am arguing, it is part of Gorgias’s irony that this claim (which is Gorgias’s) is self-canceling.

12. Cf. the preceding note and, e.g., the references mentioned in n. 8 above, as well as Cassin (“autonomie du discours,” 1980: 98), who does not, however, hold the persuasion thesis (ibid. 90–91). The word is used, e.g., by Rosenmeyer (“the autonomy of speech,” quoted by Segal [1962] 110; cf. ibid. 112, 145 n. 60), and it is implied in formulations like the following by Kerferd: “Gorgias is introducing a radical gulf between logos and the things to which it refers,” viz., between *logos* and the reality that is “irretrievably outside [logos] itself” (1981a: 81); Bett (1989) 152 n. 24 sees an incoherence lurking in Kerferd’s account.
exchange all rolled into one. *Logos* is of course all these things: it is the verbal domain and individual instances of that domain, which only renders claims about “*logos*” the more slippery. The same considerations make abstracting *logos* from its material circumstances more difficult than might at first appear.

Third, it is habitually stated that *because logos* is cut off from reality it enjoys a special potency (deceptive and persuasive powers) in its own domain. But *logos* just is this domain. We are already deceived thanks to the linguistic mediation in our experience—twice deceived, if we do not acknowledge our deception. The very instability of opinion, used to argue the power of *logos*, is an argument against the ability of *logos* to control what is intrinsically unpredictable and unstable. But what is the distinction between *logos* and its ostensible object, *doxa*? In principle, there is none, if to be susceptible to *logos* (to be in language) is to be already in a state of deception (*apatē, doxa*). The tendency here is to assume that *logos* is more powerful than opinion, when in fact these two are each other’s condition. How could we ever tell them apart? Again, the fallacy lies in making *logos* into an agent of itself. It is difficult to see how persuasion could be more powerful than the deception that is caused by or just comes with language. Nor is linguistic deception fundamentally different in kind or degree from that which comes with sensation in each of its realms (sensation and perception yield no truth and no criterion; cf. MXG 980a 12–19 and fr. B3 [65]). Finally, Gorgias’s claim, endorsed by critics, that *logos* impinges quasi-physically upon a realm that (presumably) is not constituted by language but is only “shaped” by it (the ψυχή) flatly goes against the assumption of the autonomy of *logos*, which requires that language be cut off from everything that lies externally to it. The issues involved in all these problems are complex and fraught with difficulty. I will be suggesting, however, that Gorgias was more aware of this degree of difficulty than his theory, as it is found and often admired in our handbooks, ever allows.

Rediscovering some of the clues to this awareness in the work of Gorgias will be one focus of this paper—as will tapping some of the far-reaching potential of Gorgias’s provocative writings. To glance ahead, what is “wrong” with the autonomy thesis gives us what is “right” about Gorgias’s theory of language and reality. In other words, to the extent that Gorgias suggests a version of the autonomy thesis, his theory is not falsified by its refutation; it carries within itself the necessity of its own refutation. That Gorgias made a paradoxical use of rhetoric is a well-accepted fact. As a fact, it also attracts to itself a certain indifference. We need to make Gorgias unacceptable again, to read him less for what he says than for what he does. Gorgias is not somebody who can be taken lightly at his word.

HELEN’S FOUR CAUSES

We may begin by considering the palpable structure and content of the *Encomium of Helen*, the most celebrated of Gorgias’s speeches. Its purported aim is to absolve Helen of the blame she has earned “unanimously” at the hands of poets, by telling the truth about her. As such, it smacks of the genre of the *paradoxon enkōmion*, and is a bit like discoursing in praise of salt. But the speech also becomes a platform for arguments about the nature of language and persuasion, which it is tempting to detach from the context and to view apart. Why the theory of *logos* should somehow be immune to the aporias of the speech that contains it is anything but clear. In any event, Gorgias does all that he can to make such a separation difficult to carry out, as a brief overview of the speech will show.

Helen’s birth and origins are narrated first; then four competing explanations (αἰτίαι, 5) for her behavior, each with the coherence of a separate narrative, are considered in turn. An explanation is to be sought either (1) in fate (τύχη), the gods, or necessity; or (2) in violent force (rape); or (3) in the persuasion of words; or (4) in the seductions of desire (erōs); and in any of these cases, who could blame Helen for being the victim of external compulsion? The four αἰτίαι are synonymous with Gorgias’s *logos* (“account”) and its truth, or rather (we should say) with his *logoi*, since what he in fact offers is on the one hand a single account, as forecast in 5, τοῦ μὲλλόντος λόγου, “the account to come,” and on the other the individual accounts of the individual αἰτίαι that collectively make up that coming account. *Logos* and *aitia* are wedded to one another, each giving the structure of the other, as in 15: “I will pass on to the fourth aitia with my fourth logos.” But account and *aitia* also stand apart and in tension, cleft as they are by competing arguments and even by competing meanings: αἰτία combines, ambiguously, “accusation,” “cause,” “reason,” and “responsibility” (Gorgias plays upon all of these), while *logos* has ambiguities of its own, some of which have been mentioned already (these will be explored at greater length below). A question to ask, then, is whether *logos* can sustain this carving-up of its substance, that is, whether it can be successfully held together over the course of the speech.

Gorgias’s elaborate defense falls, as we said, into four parts. Once the alternatives have been run through and explored at different lengths, Gorgias’s exoneration of Helen has, in his own eyes at least, the force of self-evidence, though not yet the character of accepted truth—or so he presents the matter, in a rhetorical question put at the end of the speech (20): “How then can one regard blame of Helen as just, since she is utterly acquitted of all charge, whether she did what she did though falling in love or persuaded by speech or ravished by force or constrained by divine constraint?” So ends the acquittal, the “ill” effects.

of one *logos* (a defamation), as it is frequently put, having been cleansed by means of the “good” effects of another *logos*, one that is either an encomium (21) or an apology (ἄπολογὴσθαι, 8)—Gorgias is intriguingly mixing his genres, a fact that would irk his pupil Isocrates, but with consequences that run deeper than even Isocrates allowed. The acquittal, at any rate, is followed by a conclusion, which reads, “I wished to write a speech [λόγος] that would be an encomium of Helen and a diversion to myself” (21).

“Diversion,” literally “plaything” or “game” (παιήγνιον), is the final word of the speech. It is devastating, quite literally so, inasmuch as it scandalously empties out the contents of whatever comes before it. It has also achieved some of what it was intended to do: invite endless speculation. As a result, Gorgias has been accused of everything from nihilism to nominalism. But let us save these labels for the end and instead turn back to the speech, its organization, and its peculiar production of meaning. For it is here that the real scandal of Helen occurs.

First, it should be observed that the Helen who emerges from Gorgias’s speech is painted, as it were, in negative relief. Her innocence is established by a series of negations, namely, the refutations of responsibility that go hand in hand with each exposition of an *aitia*. Little, curiously, of a positive nature speaks in her favor (more will be said about this below). Meanwhile, the apparently lucid, overt structure of Helen’s defense is belied by another, more complicated form. For upon closer inspection, Gorgias manages, through a never-spoken logic of entailments and verbal repetitions, to equate without quite conflating necessity, violence, persuasion, and *erōs*, by “showing” in effect that each of the terms may be viewed as an aspect of the remaining terms: (divine) necessity is a kind of violence; persuasion is a form of seduction; but *erōs* can be violent and “necessary,” like divinity and persuasion; etc. G. E. R. Lloyd once observed, “In neither speech [sc. Helen and Palamedes, which share structural similarities] are the alternatives such as to be formally mutually exclusive and exhaustive.” It is possible to imagine a scenario in which all four causative factors were co-present, all impinging, either in turn or at once, upon Helen. But Gorgias takes things a step further, in the direction of encapsulation and assimilation. His four alternatives dissolve into a series of approximations and analogies. They are convergent to the point of identity.

We may consider just enough examples to make the point graphic. It will be intuitively obvious, for instance, that metaphysical compulsion (fate, the gods, or necessity, ἀνάγκη) cannot be neatly separated from force (βία), the topic of the

16. Cf. *Hel.* 14, where Gorgias mentions “an evil persuasion” (πειθοῖ ἡκατη), to which his own is assumedly opposed.

17. Nihilism: Dodds (1959) 8, debunking the label conferred on Gorgias by Gomperz (1912)


18. Lloyd (1979) 83.
following aitia (7), for “it is the nature of things . . . for the weaker to be ruled and drawn by the stronger, and god is stronger in force [βίοι] and in wisdom and in other ways” (6). Nor can persuasion be considered apart from metaphorical compulsions, for we learn in 8 that “speech is a powerful lord,” a δυνάστης μέγας, which “by means of the finest and most invisible body [σμαροτάτω σώματι] effects the divinest works [θειότατα ἔργα].” Needless to say, the incantations of persuasive speech are “sacred,” literally ἐνθεοί, “full of the god” (10). In view of 12, which is spoiled at its beginning by a few hopelessly corrupt lines, the force of persuasion and that of necessity at the very least have the same quality or power (δύναμις):19 “The persuader, like one who compels [ὡς ἀναγκάσας: lit., “one who necessitates”], does the wrong, and the one persuaded [Helen], like one compelled [ὡς ἀναγκασθείσα, “necessitated”] by speech, is wrongly charged.” The ambiguous particle ὡς creates a precise confusion in the italicized portions: the logics of analogy (“like”) and explanation (“since”) appear to overlap in their discontinuity; and it is this very uncertainty, between analogical and factual description, that will prove to be symptomatic of Gorgias’s speech as a whole. Language in its effects is, moreover, a kind of rape: in 12, “under the influence of speech” (or song: ὑμνος), Helen’s fate was to have been overwhelmed, “just as if she was ravished by the force of the mighty [δόσει εἰ βιατήρῳ βίῳ ἠπρόσθεν].”20 Finally, through the violence (and necessity) of language, divinely masterful persuasion approximates the compulsions, necessities, or just fatalities of (divinely) masterful seduction (εἰ μὲν θεός ἄνω ξέγει θεόν θείαν δύναμιν; cf. τύχης ἀγρεύμασιν . . . ἐφικτὸς ἀνάγκαις, 19), the last of the aitiae. If Gorgias is trying to keep his aitiai apart, he is trying no less hard to make that task next to impossible.21

Above, Helen’s status was seen to emerge as the sum of a series of (hypothetical) negations: “If she was driven by external force or [etc.], she is not to be held responsible for what she did.” Here, we see those negations melting away before our very eyes, through a countertide of negations, that is, through the doubling back of Gorgias’s language upon itself and upon its own ambitions: in their effects, not to say in their descriptions, fate is indistinguishable from force, etc. How are the indirections of the kind documented just above, the erosions of distinctions and even of clarity, essential to Gorgias’s point? In other words, how can we explain the peculiar, self-canceling structure of Helen, which is likely to

19. Diels proposes this sense (cf. app. crit. ad loc.): “Persuasion does not have the [outward] form of necessity, but it does have the same power.” The analogy is clear however the wording is construed. (Donadi’s recent text provides no solutions.)
20. This is most certainly the force of the comparison, whatever the text (Diels’s conjecture ex. grat. is adopted here, and Kennedy’s translation is slightly modified). The syntax of δύναμις is likewise uncertain. For ὑμνος meaning “speech,” Xen. Apol. 26; cf. Calogero (1957) 416–17.
21. Cf. Aesch. Ag. 385–86, where Gorgias’s “four causes” are already conjoined and associated with the illusory image (φάσμα, 415) of Helen; and Porter (1990) 35 with n. 26. In Helen the phraseological echoes and links of the sort mentioned abound. For instance, οὐσία is connected with fate (6); ἐνδυνάσασθαι and λόγοι with force (7); ἡτύχησαι with logos (15); ἑτυχε and ἀνάγκη with desire (15, 19); etc.
be a crucial part of the speech’s content?22 The four “explanations” may be reducible to four different, if comparable, perspectives on a single “event.” But the question raised so pressingly by Gorgias is whether Helen is in turn reducible to these accounts of her behavior. The story of her first appearance contains untold perspectives of its own.

Helen’s mythical birth and origins are exposed in encomiastic fashion in 3: “Now it is not unclear, not even to a few, that in nature and in blood the woman who is the subject of this speech is preeminent among preeminent men and women.” The passage looks back to the preamble and forward to the sequel. If beauty, wisdom, virtue, and truth (1) are all stated or implied in the account of her pedigree (her mother was Leda; her father, Zeus or Tyndareus, depending on whom or what you believe), so too are divinity, power (κράτισσας, τύραννος), rape (ερως), and speech. As it happens, these latter are also the “causes” that Gorgias will soon claim to be the source (and exculpating factors) of her blame. Had Gorgias wished to write an unequivocal palinode about Helen, he would have done well to cover up the scandal of her origins. Instead, like Euripides in another so-called “palinode” of Helen (Hel. 17–21, 255–66), he obtrudes them quietly into the foreground, in part just by reminding us of them, but in equal measure by making them all but illegible.

Helen’s mythical origins forecast the structural attributes she is to acquire as victim in Gorgias’s text: those origins are double, and they are ensnared in the dialectical perplexities of being and saying. Enmeshed in the squabblings over her pedigree, Helen has entered, in other words, into language. This is where Gorgias’s own language begins to freight itself with complication: δήλων γάρ ὃς μητρὸς μὲν Λήδας, πατρὸς δὲ τοῦ μὲν γενομένου θεοῦ, λεγομένου δὲ θηντοῦ, Τυνδάρεω καὶ Δίος (“For it is clear that her mother was Leda, and her father was a god, but allegedly a mortal, Tyndareus and Zeus”)—and here the crucial contamination of an assertion with its own rhetoric comes in: ὁν ὦ μὲν διὰ τὸ εἶναι ἔδοξεν, ὃ δὲ διὰ τὸ φάναι ἡλέχθη [AX: ἠλέχθη Γ], καὶ ἐν ὦ μὲν ἄνδρων κράτισσας ὃ δὲ πάντων τύραννος (“of whom the one [Zeus], just because he was, appeared the father, and the other [Tyndareus], just because he was said to be [or “just because he said he was”], was disproved to be the father; and the one was the most powerful of men and the other the lord of all.” 3).

The Greek is bafflingly compressed and antithetical; like the speech as a whole (in the way described above), the language of this passage threatens to lapse into a general confusion.23 One scholar rightly calls the sense that results

22. Not to speak of the catalogue of virtues and vices that frames the speech, and that depends on the acceptance of a clearly defined pattern of oppositions (εννοητικα), 1).
23. Compare fr. B 26 (Proclus), where the antitheses likewise threaten to collapse parodically into each other: “Gorgias claimed that being is invisible, unless coupled with appearance; and that appearance is strengthless, unless coupled with being” (ἐλεγε δὲ τὸ μὲν εἶναι ἄφαντας μὴ τυχόν τοῦ δοκεῖν, τὸ δὲ δοκεῖν ἀσθενεῖς μὴ τυχόν τοῦ ἑναποκρινομαι). For two tellingly opposite interpretations of this dictum, see Guthrie (1971) 193 n. 1, Cole (1991) 148–49. Calogero (1977) 268 n. 72 ("un richiamo all’eguale necessità di entrambi i momenti") comes closer to the mark.
from the reading accepted by virtually every editor ("was refuted to be") "absurd," and prefers instead the conjecture of the apographs, "was said to be."24 Gorgias, however, is entitled to his absurdity, which appears to be carefully calculated, consisting as it does in balanced near-contradictions and in obscurities that, regardless of the solution we may opt for, simply won't go away.25 One way of making sense of Gorgias's "absurdity" ("was refuted") was alluded to above, and it will increasingly claim our attention below: here as elsewhere in the same speech, the accent falls on the vulnerability, not the power, of logos; just to speak is to be open to devastating refutation—or else, on the alternative reading, to empty tautology ("was said to be—because of the claim to be").26 Gorgias's "confusion" is meaningfully constructed. In the passage before us the subjects of the clauses are gradually blurred (who is "the most powerful," and who "the lord of all"?). The logic of their respective identities totters in an uncertainty that is as disquieting as Helen's disputed and, even after clarification, troubled, forever bifurcated, and—most important of all—symbolically complex origins.27

In Gorgias's compressed tale, language and reality falteringly approach one another. Later on in 15 the accent falls once again on the defective interchange between saying and being, on the alleged nature of Helen's crime (τὴν τῖς λέγομένης γεγονέναι ἀμαρτίας αἰτίαν, "the charge [cause] of the offense that was said to have taken place"). This tension runs through the whole of the speech, which principally takes the form of what goes unsaid about things that turn out not to be. And as above, Helen's identity is to be located somewhere in their midst.

ON WHAT IS NOT SAID ABOUT WHAT IS NOT (HELEN AS MYTH)

Who or what exactly is Helen? Helen's status is first and last that of a mythical being. In Gorgias's play upon the then-current philosophical vocabulary, she has all the being of a nonbeing. If we take Gorgias at his word, she is a figure universally condemned, περὶ ἡς ὁμόφωνος καὶ ὁμόψυχος γέγονεν ἢ τε τῶν ποιητῶν ἀκουσάντων πίστις ἢ τε τοῦ ὁνόματος φήμη, δ τῶν συμφορῶν

24. MacDowell (1961) 121. But see id. (1982) 13, where "antithetical paradox" is recognized to be a hallmark of Gorgias's authentic writings.

25. The passage as a whole is structured chiastically and by reversal. The chiasmus, moreover, requires a second antithesis. Hence ἡλέγχθη can easily mean "refuted," not "proved" (which is also possible); but the indeterminacy between these may just be symptomatic of Gorgias's deepest strategies.

26. Alternatively, "was proved to be" / "because of the claim to be" exposes circularities of another, related kind.

27. Other conventional allusions may be at play, further complicating Gorgias's associations, but reinforcing the point that Helen's complex genealogy foretells her manifold "aetiology." Cf. Eur. Hec. 816 (Peithô), Hipp. 538 (erôs), both being "tyrannos of men"; frs. 431, 136.1 N2 (on this last, see Turato 1976: 171 n. 69).
μνήμη γέγονεν ("[a woman] about whom both the belief of those who listen to poets and the mention of her name, which has become a token [reminder] of her misfortunes, have come to be [viz., are] univocal and unanimous," 2). But in the literary tradition, which is the tradition that Gorgias cites here at the start of his speech, and which supplies the speech with its primary frame of reference,28 Helen is hardly damned unequivocally. The discrepancy needs to be underscored. One need go no further than Iliad Book 3 for evidence of a wavering view of Helen’s guilt. As Priam says to her on the way to the walls, in words that not by chance will sound a familiar note for the reader (or hearer) of Gorgias’s speech, οὐ τί μοι αἰτίη ἔσοι, θεοί νῦ μοι αἴτωι εἰσον (3.164; cf. 6.344–58, 24.761–76).29 Helen in the Odyssey is likewise riven by conflicting and contested interpretations (one thinks of Bks. 4 and 15 in particular: her and Menelaos’s divergent accounts of her behavior at Troy; and the sympathetic portrait of Helen and Telemachos, which turns on the twin themes of fidelity and, tellingly, memory).

Gorgias’s claim that the poetic tradition about Helen was in any way “univocal” and “unanimous” (ὁμόφωνος καὶ ὁμόψυχος) flies directly in the face of the tradition that he invokes. In fact, ambivalent complexity should be recognized as defining the tradition associated with Helen, as the poets were always aware, and as audiences could be expected to echo in their own awarenesses. Stesichorus is perhaps the most striking counterexample to Gorgias’s claim, and the most appropriate witness to my claim about the fundamentally divided representation of Helen in Greek poetry. Stesichorus’s portrayal of Helen is divided in itself. But with one more interpretive leap he can be seen to be commenting symbolically on a fact about the poetry that comes before him. When Stesichorus makes himself into a penitent and atoning victim of his victimization (he says “revilement”) of Helen, he is not contradicting, palinodically, the tradition; he is merely dramatizing the contradictory tendencies of that tradition (its victimization and rehabilitation of Helen), by polarizing and exacerbating them.30 Stesichorus claims that the Helen who went to Troy was a phantom (ἐἴδωλον), a being that is not (a pure semblance). But this is only a literary ruse, which makes of the phantom a sign of poetic fiction and poetic negation: he is explicating what is already present as an excess in Homer, in the guise of a critique of what is missing in Homer and his literary succession.31 Helen was never of one voice or

28. This fact of the speech has been noted, but variously construed. See Norden (1903) 203–4, with Segal (1962) 145 n. 63, 129; Rosenmeyer (1955) 232–33; Verdenius (1981) 127.

29. Cf. εἰ οὖν τῇ Τύχῃ καὶ τοῖς θεοῖ τὴν αἰτίαν ἀνάθετεν, τὴν Ἐλένην τῆς δυσκλείας ἀπολυτέων. "If then one must place blame on Fate and on a god, one must free Helen from disgrace," Hel. 6.

30. Revilement and “palinode,” after all, jointly comprise the “dialectical” unity of Stesichorus’s one poem, as it is generally understood today; see Kannicht (1969) 1: 21–41, esp. 40–41.

31. Cf. ἔτει μουσικός ὄν (Plat. Phdr. 243a). The eidolon, in other words, is pointedly metaphorical, a piece of poetic cunning, like Stesichorus’s “blindness” (rivaling Homer’s own). Cf. also Zeitlin (1981) 202. Stesichorus’s immediate inspiration in Homer can be further pinpointed; see infra, n. 38.
mind (or appearance); and neither was the poetic tradition that ensnared her. Be this as it may, Lesky states that Gorgias pulls off his stunt, his defense of Helen, “without availing himself” of this “alternative” myth.32

It was once fashionable to state such denials. Lesky is repeating the point made by Bruns,33 who read Gorgias’s speech as a characteristically sophistic corrective to the version put forward by Stesichorus (and Euripides, by his dating): Helen can be absolved just as she is, without dragging in gods and alternative myths. But Gorgias precisely uses “gods,” and he suggests alternative mythical stories (any of which could be the “true” story) even as he undoes them. And Gorgias could not accomplish his one-upmanship even on Bruns’s reading without implicitly making allusion to Stesichorus (his mention of Helen’s “revilement” is itself one).34 At the very least, Gorgias’s logic would be producing functional equivalents of Stesichorus’s phantom (the causal accounts for Helen’s behavior that are rejected, “palinodically”). It does. But the mechanism of Gorgias’s play of fictions is far more complex than either Bruns or Lesky suppose.

More recent readers of Gorgias simply ignore the possibility that Gorgias’s Helen might be a figure for a phantom, in other words, a being that is not. Of course, such a premise would make havoc of the speech from the start. But why defend the speech against the absurdity with which it also closes? Helen qualifies as an exemplary nonbeing just by virtue of being literary and mythical, and multiply overwritten.35 Paradoxically, Gorgias’s glaring simplification of the poetic tradition in 2 can only be seen as an allusion to the very complexity of this tradition. It makes no difference that Gorgias’s entire speech is overtly premised on her sailing off to Troy, as in 5: “I will lay out the causes [motivations, explanations, accusations] through which it was likely [probable, reasonable: εἰκός] for Helen’s voyage to Troy to occur [γενέσθαι].” Statements like this address only the logic of Helen’s abduction; they tell us nothing about Gorgias’s endorsement of that logic, and if anything they suggest a coy distance from it.36 Recall that Gorgias is addressing τὴν τὴς λεγομένης γεγονόντα αἰματίας αἰτίαν, “the charge of the offense that was said to have taken place” (15). Gorgias, after all, is speaking to an audience who “know what they know” (τοῖς εἰδόσιν ἀ ἵσαι, 5)—traditionally, a wink from poets, and a sign of irony.37 Gorgias’s own

32. Lesky (n.d.) 352.
33. Bruns (1905) 88–90.
34. With Stesichorus’s κακηγορία (Plat. Phdr. 243a), compare Gorgias’s κακολογηθείη (7) and τοῖς μεμορμένοις Ἐλέσθην (2).
35. Sykutris (1928) 17 credits Gorgias with an insight into the plasticity of myth: “Erstens muß das Werk als ein Deutungsversuch eines Mythos—nicht allein des Helena-mythos—with ähnlichen Erscheinungen der Zeit verglichen . . . werden . . . Als Stoff ist er ihm ein παράγων.” Parallels deserve to be explored. They rarely are; but see Solmsen (1934), and the critical notice by Kannicht (1960) 1: 58. Zuntz (1960) 223, Turato (1976), and Zeitlin (1981) are all relevant here.
stated role is not to ply his audience with mere conviction (πίστιν), but with pleasure (τέρψιν, 5). It is a pleasure that we, from our great distance, have partly ceased to share.

With this knowledge, it is possible to redefine from a new perspective the form that Gorgias’s speech assumes: for what the speech now appears to present are in fact plural “versions” of the scene of Helen’s seduction, as represented by the four aitiai at whose door the responsibility for her actions hypothetically is to be laid, if not laid to rest. Insofar as they coexist without displacing one another, these alternative “stories” may be seen to reenact the complexities of the tradition of Helen itself, the poetic overdeterminedness of Helen’s tale. What is more, they do everything but name the one reason why Helen sailed off to Troy, which is, simply put, the belief that she did (cf. ἡ πίστις, 2)—whether that belief is founded on a literary assumption, or that assumption is shown to be a literary phantom. Either way, belief in Helen is founded not on truth or on falsehood, but on a desire, which Gorgias is both exploiting and laying shockingly bare—with a degree of forcefulness matched only by Stesichorus’s poem (more on this “desire” in the final section). 38

Gorgias’s paiganion as a whole is the functional equivalent of Stesichorus’s phantom: both are conceived in the spirit of literary and mythological negation. His arguments circle around their hypothetical point of origin, each new “narrative” (or aitia) “constructing” Helen’s story and her identity afresh, like so many poetic narrations of a single myth. It only remains to wonder whether the “myth” in question is a singular entity, or whether it is not in fact the sum total of its versions and revisions. We will come back to this below, but for now it is important to see how in sheer narrative terms Helen embodies her own self-difference: she is, so to speak, a not-one marked out by a many—a manifold of possible negations, each “version” establishing only a negative certainty about her. If so, then Gorgias is asking us to reconceptualize who it is that he is defending, and so too, what this defense amounts to.

In 4, where Helen’s origins and genealogy are told, she is described as ἐκ τοιούτων γενομένη, “born of such origins,” of sources that are no less disputed and uncertain than Gorgias makes them out to be. The Helen who emerges from this paragraph is a singular and unstable plurality, a synthesis of contraries, never quite “one” because she is always and irretrievably “many” (an analytic rather than organic “whole”; cf. fr. B 3 [74]: σύνθεσις γὰρ τῶν καθ’ ἐν ἐστι τὰ πολλά). A perspective like this instantly casts a cloud on the “univocality” of the traditional Helen—a univocality that (as we saw) Gorgias himself disputes, though without replacing it with one of his own. But in showing Helen forth in all of her complexity, Gorgias has also shifted the conceptual level of the debate, by

38. Unless we include Helen’s misty professions about herself and her reality in the Iliad, both of which are caught in a vacillation, or rather ambiguity, between being and not-being: “but that never happened” (ἀλλὰ τὰ γ’ οὖν ἐγένοντο), “if these [or just possibly “I’] ever were [was]” (εἰ ποτ’ ἔην γε), II. 3.176, 180.
introducing as it were three new protagonists: Being, Saying, and what converts one into the other, Appearing. This puts Helen directly into contact with the rest of Gorgias’s corpus of writings.

For comparison’s sake, we might take a side glance at Gorgias’s other preserved display speech, his Defense of Palamedes (the dates of both speeches are unknown, but, as has been noted, they are structurally similar, and they share features with his treatise On Not-Being; or, On Nature).39 The latter speech consists entirely in a verbal reconstruction of what the defendant, Palamedes (the inventor of games—draughts—and the letters of the alphabet, Pal. B 12 [30]) claims to be a nonevent (τὸ μὴ γενόμενον, 5; cf. 11, γενέσθω καὶ τὰ μὴ γενόμενα; 23, ἀγένητα; cf. MXG 979b26), something that never happened, but that nonetheless furnishes the substance of a criminal accusation leveled against him by Odysseus. Palamedes is, in essence, a proof of not-being, as is the Encomium of Helen itself, which begins by “showing,” through a series of negations, that an event never took place (Helen’s voluntary assumption of a guilt), and which ends by showing, as I hope is becoming clear, that Helen is herself that nonevent (a phantom). To recall the language of his famously disputed claim from On Not-Being: “Nothing is” (fr. B 3 [65]; MXG 979b12). Helen, even more than Palamedes, occupies the place of this uncertain “is.”40 And like him, she embodies the limit of her own possible defense: her speech is likewise constructed around its own impossibility and implausibility. Perhaps Plato was not far off after all when he said of rhetoricians that they “bewitch” (γοητεύειν) the ears of their audiences, by “exhibiting images of all things in a shadow-play of discourse [lit., “spoken phantom images”: δεικνύότας εἰδωλά λεγόμενα περὶ πάντων], so as to make them believe that they are hearing the truth” (Sophist 234c; tr. Cornford).

To return now to the joint status of language, being, and appearance in Helen, and to adapt an expression from Gorgias, Helen appears to be because she is said to be. In Gorgias’s account of her, Helen becomes the motivation and projection of the very ideologies that her behavior was said or supposed to have threatened (Helen giving rise, in 4, to ambitious designs; social achievement, honor, prowess, the exercise of knowledge are all implicated, and reminiscent of the values tallied up in 1: “Her one body was the cause of bringing together many bodies [ἐνι δὲ σώματι πολλὰ σώματα συνήγαγεν] of men thinking great thoughts for great goals, of whom some had greatness of wealth, some the glory of ancient nobility, some the vigor of personal agility, some command of acquired knowl-

39. “In both Gorgias employs disjunctive arguments that are strikingly reminiscent of . . . the dilemmas of On What is Not”: Lloyd (1979) 83 with n. 122. The dates of all three writings are unknown. See the discussion in MacDowell (1982) 17.

40. The claim ought to be ambivalent: nothing is, because being does not exist, or because nothing (Not-Being) has existence. The atomists had already recognized Not-Being as a component of physis. The ambiguity is implied by Gorgias’s duplex title, which is genuine. On Parmenides’ own duplex title, see Guthrie (1971) 194; on Gorgias’s title, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983) 392 n.
edge” (4), all properties that are not Helen’s, but that she attracts to her person. Gorgias is of course reversing the habitual “one/many” cliché that attaches to Helen from Homer onwards (Od. 11.438, 14.69; Aesch. Ag. 62, 1456). But again, it pays to take heed of the peculiar abstract qualities of Gorgias’s language, its immediate echoes in his own speech, and its possible resonances with his other writings.

At one level, Helen has the exact status of the iconic, painterly and “composite,” image depicted in 18: ἀλλὰ μὴν οἱ γραφὲς ὅταν ἐκ πολλῶν χρωμάτων καὶ σωμάτων ἔν σῶμα καὶ σχῆμα τελείως ἀπεργᾶσωνται, τέρπουσι τὴν ὄψιν (“Whenever painters perfectly create a single body and shape from many colors and bodies, they delight the sight”). As above (in 4), we have an attractive “single body,” one that, here, is manifestly made up. Both “images” (Helen and the painter’s icon) furnish visual delight; both can be seductive and pleasurable (but also painful [18] or painfully pleasurable [9]); both embody a kind of unrivaled and irresistible perfection; both resemble the illusions of rhetoric (cf. Plato, Soph. 234c, Rep. 586b–c) but also those of literature (cf. Hel. 8–9; Aesch. Ag. 242). Iconic images (εἰκόνας) engraved in the mind are the explicit topic of the fourth aitia (15–19), whose aim is to acquit Helen of any guilt entailed by an erotic, visual compulsion beyond her powers of control (Alexander’s “body” overpowering her “eye,” 18). But we have already heard about Helen’s irresistible powers of attraction, and there is no way to dissociate the painter’s construction of a delightful body from the powers of Helen’s own image, which is to say, her own multiply constructed, multiply imagined, worshipful body (she too is an ἀγάλμα, an εἰκὼν, or, if you like, an εἴδωλον).41 If visual images produce desire (πόθον ἐνεργάζεται) and the desire of (or just for) desire (προθυμίαν ἔρωτος) in the mind of the beholder (19), the image of Helen worked this very effect on whoever beheld her (ἐπιθυμιάς ἔρωτος ἐνεργάζεται, 4).42

A composite figure, literally a product of ποίησις and ἐργασία (18),43 Helen is, at another level, not what she is, but both more and less. Helen, we might say, is elusively bound up with the logic of the one and the many. Like the Helen of Odyssey Book 4, who is divided into multiple identities, mouthing the words and miming the voices of every woman belonging to the men inside the Trojan horse, Helen, if she is anything at all, represents something for everyone. A figure of desire, Helen is also a figure of projection, and perhaps she (or else, the tradition that embodies her) is nothing more than the sum of her projected identifications. Helen as she appears in Gorgias’s speech, I would suggest, is not a stable identity; she is viewed instead as a series of superimposed layerings of a historical, poetic tradition, like the plaster that Euripides’ Helen would like, impossibly, to

41. Cf. Eur. Hel. 34, where Helen’s eidolon is the result of one such synthesis.
42. The two passages are in fact mirror images of each other: πολλὰ δὲ πολλῶν ἔρωτα καὶ πόθον ἐνεργάζεται πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων (19); πλείστας δὲ πλείστοις ἐπιθυμίας ἔρωτος ἐνεργάζεται (4).
43. Cf. the parallels between 18 and 8–9: ποίησις/ποίησιν; ποθεῖν/πόθος; λυπεῖν/λύπην; χρωμάτων καὶ σωμάτων / πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων.
have now removed from her comely face—which is the face of a phantom (ἐξαλειψθείσ’ ὦς ἀγαλμα[τ]α, 262). Helen is a phantom object, upon which have been inscribed traits that tell us more about their source than about her. In Gorgias’s speech, she assumes the form of a perspectival projection that vanishes before our eyes: her elusive appearance entails her not being. Such is the fugitive coincidence that Helen somehow (and always) “is.”

Helen’s repeated exposures in the speech only intensify her reduction to a simulacrum. We have already seen how divinity, power, rape, and speech are all stated or implied in Helen’s pedigree—and so too, how her physis and genesis already uncannily contain the “fate” that is said to sully her blameless origins. No longer merely conceptually independent or even perspectively coherent, the four “causes” of her suffering cannot be distinguished or analyzed, while Helen—if she is to be held responsible for her actions at all—is no more than their synthesis (ἐκ τοιούτων γενομένη). In Gorgias’s words, “she did what she did,” ἔπραξεν ᾧ ἔπραξεν (6). Tautology appears to replace logic. But what did what she do? The differences between the four ἀιτίαι are as little definitive as are other demarcations drawn along the way: for example, between the “two” kinds (δύσαί τέχναι) of sorcery and magic in 10, namely ψυχῆς ἀμαρτήματα καὶ δόξης ἀπαθήματα, or (it follows) between the “evil” sort of persuasion and its presumed opposite in 14. It is as likely that the very distinction between these two pairs or four sorts is the illusory effect of any one of them, for how could they be told apart? Finally, if Gorgias can claim in 10 to pass from one speech to another (πρὸς ἄλλον ἀπ’ ἄλλου ἡμεταιστῶ λόγον), but in the very same breath can claim that what makes states of the mind pass into their opposite is the bewitching capacity of persuasive language (ἡ δύναμις . . . ἡμεταστησον αὐτήν [sc. τὴν ψυχὴν] γοητεῖα), one can only conclude (and Gorgias can only be advertising it as well) that his speech is no more than an imaginary itinerary, one drawn (and erased) in the mind of its producer and consumer: going through the motions of going somewhere, the speech literally goes nowhere. Some of this free motion may be explained as the sign of a literary representation that has been made explicit, the effect of which is to empty out the representation of Helen. But of what is Helen the sign? And what are the implications of all of this for Gorgias’s claims about persuasion? There are a number of possible replies.

LOGOS AND NOT-BEING

One answer to the puzzle concerning Gorgias’s methods and their apparent incongruence might be found in the view that logos has to be conceived of as

44. Commentators (e.g., MacDowell ad loc.; Immisch sought to emend the text) are troubled by the transition between 8 and 9, where Gorgias writes, “I shall prove [my point]; and I shall prove it by opinion too,” as if he were talking about two kinds of proof, when in fact there is only one kind, which works by way of logos and doxa at the same time (they are one). Such is Gorgias’s paradoxology. On speech and persuasion, another paradox of twins, see below on “Logos and Not-Being.”
wholly autonomous and highly potent. Gorgias is merely displaying the extraordinary powers of *logos* within its own realm: its powers are plastic; it can create and dissolve realities at its user's will.\(^{45}\) in this case, we might say, by narrativizing them. Because Helen does not explicitly offer such a theory, support for this view has been found in other of Gorgias's *pronunciamenti* on language and reality, most typically the treatise *On Not-Being;* or, *On Nature*, especially in the claim that language is self-contained and can convey only itself: we do not hear vision; we cannot communicate *pragmata*, sensible realities about which we boast our language to be and to which it is in fact irreducible: we are condemned to linguistic tautologies, to a communication of and through words, hence (it is inferred, because the claim is not to be found in *On Not-Being*), to deception and distortion. From this it seems to follow that language exists in an autonomous domain; and the same will hold for the psychological reality that it governs, which must be granted an existence that rivals, even supersedes, sensible reality. Hence, Gorgias can be credited with the view that "persuasion was sovereign because there was no truth over and above what a man could be persuaded to believe."\(^{46}\)

This is by and large the going view of Gorgias. It can satisfyingly account for Helen only if we make a number of accommodations. First, it has to be conceded that Helen itself cannot be taken as evidence for the kind of persuasiveness that this theory would explain. By itself, the speech persuades a hearer of nothing. At most, we might say, Helen will be a speech about persuasion, but not one that effects or conveys persuasion. But then, is the persuasion that Helen is about the same persuasion as the theory attributed to Gorgias takes on board? I think not. Within the speech, persuasion is recognized to be only one of four possible explanations for Helen's waywardness; it does not displace the other three (fate, force, desire); neither do these, for all their overlaps and near-approximation, reduce neatly to verbal persuasion.\(^{47}\) At most, all four accounts are reducible to each other, or at least to each other's descriptions if we follow Gorgias's language as closely as we should, which is to say that logos is not the irreducibly powerful component it is so often claimed to be. If all four *aitiatai* could be subsumed under logos, then of course Gorgias will have said the same thing four times and in four ways: Helen was persuaded by Alexander, and this is the real reason for her abduction. But Gorgias doesn't let us off the hook so easily. Quite the contrary: he leaves us wriggling in uncertainty and perplexity to the very end, having managed somehow to say four different things in the same way.

Arguments that turn on the independent powers of persuasive logos are not so much wrong as they account for only one aspect of Gorgias's multifaceted project; only, the facets do not add up to a coherent whole. It is difficult to see how these kinds of argument can be made to square with the evidence of Helen,

\(^{45}\) Rosenmeyer (1955) 232: "Logos is a creator of its own reality"; Dodds (1973) 95.

\(^{46}\) Guthrie (1971) 211.

\(^{47}\) A fact rarely acknowledged. But see Donadi (1985) 482–84, who focuses mainly on opsis, "che parla un linguaggio anteriore al discorso, e non riducibile ad esso" (484).
which, being neither persuasive (judged by its own criteria) nor uniquely about persuasion, seems deliberately to elude the characterization that its performative dimension, the very act of haranguing, would most seem to invite. Persuasion's only claim to remarkable in Helen is the formal dissonance that it installs within the argument, its remarkable impertinence. True, the exposition of this aitia (8–14) takes up by far the greatest amount of space and detail, compared with the other three aitiae. But in its occupancy of this space it is something of a dead weight: it statically fills up room in a speech that is otherwise conspicuously, even flagrantly, unpersuasive—at most, it is a mere "diversion" and a digression. But then, the whole speech merits no more than the same qualification. How seriously are we to take Gorgias? A related question, which is rarely asked, is whether the "metadescr iptive" account of persuasion contributes to or takes away from the persuasiveness of that account and of the account of which it is just a part; that is, whether arguments about persuasion, just by being about what they are, carry no conviction; or, again, whether the seductions of Gorgias's Helen are not, precisely, other than those of persuasion (forced conviction). If any of this is right, then his speech is deceptive in a way that has never been truly understood. Consequently, the problem needs to be reformulated. As will emerge below, Gorgias in this speech shines his spotlight so intensely on logos in order that we might all the better see what logos is not.

Nor do Gorgias's descriptions of logos from elsewhere in his corpus throw any other light on the problem. Appeals to the treatise On Not-Being, as it is reported in Sextus and in the anonymous MXG, fail to take into account the nature of his argument there, or its implications. Whatever the difficulties of interpreting these reports, it clearly emerges from them that language is not Gorgias's solitary preoccupation, nor is accounting for its capacities necessarily his primary object either. And whatever else they show, the remains of his theory of language from On Not-Being point unequivocally to the limitations of language, not to its powers. There, Gorgias repeatedly demonstrates how language is circumscribed by the spheres of sensation; not a word is said about its powers within the domain that is left to language. The speech on Helen surprisingly confirms this thesis. Logos, for example, is not only incommensurable with what lies "outside"; it is powerless before the realm of the body and its attendant sensations. As Gorgias says: "The things we see don't have the nature that we want for them, but only the nature that each thing actually has" (ὁ γὰρ ὀρῶμεν, ἦς ἡγήμεν ἡμᾶς ἔχεται ἔσεσθαι, ἀλλ' ἆν ἔκαστον ἔτυχε, Hel. 15), and this fact can be multiplied for each of the senses and the imprints they leave on the mind (17). Can logos effectively and durably annul these imprints? Gorgias nowhere suggests that it can. Physical compulsions like drugs or opsis enjoy an immediacy of effect that no amount of speech can alter. The constant appeals in

Helen to an extralinguistic realm, in the form of analogies (logos is like a drug, or like vision), do nothing to confirm the intrinsic power of logos; they only advertise the fact that we lack the words to describe what it is that logos “does.” The question to ask, however, is not what are the relevant analogies, but what does logos in fact do? The answer typically given is that “logos persuades,” but then of what? Helen may have been persuaded, “if she was,” but she may have been raped, erotically overpowered, or divinely compelled. From here we surely cannot get to the claim that the speech persuades us of the triumphs of persuasion, because the speech is implausible from the very start—and not just by the end, where it closes with a reference to itself as a paignion. The speech does not act like the drugs it names.

But the problems surrounding logos run deeper still. Insofar as logos is itself a sensible object, that is, one of the “outer realities” (a ὑποκείμενον, fr. B 3 [86])—and this too, like the stages of “proof” in Helen, can only be asserted as part of a dialectical construction (εἰ γὰρ καὶ ὑπόκειται ὁ λόγος, ibid.)—it is subject to all the constraints of sensation: seen (which is not quite the same thing as read), logos is different from the same logos heard; what you hear will be different from what I hear now, or from the same sounds either of us heard yesterday (MXG 980b14–17). It is not even clear that logos and thought share the same reality identically: logos at least has a communicable, possibly sensible, dimension; thought, apparently, has neither (980b9, 19).50 If logos is autonomous in its own realm, so are the realms of the objects to which it is opposed: why privilege the powers of logos, when the very source of its presumed authority is the source of its strictures and impotence?51 But perhaps the real problem with readings of Gorgias that accord him a theory of linguistic autonomy is that they sacrifice their own genuine rigor. For if language is truly autonomous, self-enclosed, and self-sufficient, it will also be autonomous of its psychic effects. It will not do to argue, for example, that “these two, psychē and logos, lie both within the realm of tangible experience and become for Gorgias the new reality,” of which logos may be said to be the “creator.” Here we find smuggled back into the picture of an autonomous logos the very condition (sensible experience, tangibility) whose radical otherness is required to argue that autonomy in the first place.52

50. Newiger (1973) valiantly attempts to systematize the evidence into a doctrine about the identity of logos and thought or knowledge of truth (ibid. 173), but points instead to Gorgias’s dilemmas.

51. This is an aspect of logos that is rightly but fleetingly mentioned by Segal ([1962] 110: “restricted to its proper area,” “with full awareness of its limitations,” “fallibility”; cf. Calogero [1977] 259: “incapacită”); but elsewhere all such awareness is dropped whenever logos is approximated to physical reality and the requirements of persuasion (e.g., Segal 106). See further, next note.

52. Segal (1962) 110, Rosenmeyer (1955) 232. This reimportation of the physical is a “basic and necessary assumption” if logos is to effectuate itself in the way Gorgias claims for it (Segal 106–7). The autonomy of logos is specified by Segal (110), following Rosenmeyer (231), as a freedom “from
It is usually concluded from this kind of argument that all language, just by functioning autonomously and inventively, must be deceptive to the core. But restore Gorgias’s conception in all its radical stringency, and not only must we imagine a *logos* that, properly speaking, knows no distortion but is only knowable through and as distortion, deception, and *doxa* (in this respect, it merely resembles any faculty of sensation that opens its window only onto what exists for itself); we have to imagine a *logos* that is without echo or resonance, without access to its audience, without persuasive effect, utterly lacking a corresponding physiology or psychology, but that simply exists in the realm of its own literal “tautology”: λέγει ὁ λέγων, “the speaker speaks” (MXG 980b2–3; cf. fr. B 3 [84]). The speaker speaks, perhaps—but then speaking takes place in isolation from any contents that can be specified, let alone “revealed.” The speaker is mute; the communicant, deaf.53

Below we will want to return to the question of the speaker’s “contents,” which is partly captured by Calogero’s observation that in Gorgias “nonussista quell’ identificazione, o essenziale coincidenza, fra il contenuto verbale e il contenuto conoscitivo, altra essendo la concreta e immediata esperienza sensibile e altro il λόγος con cui si tenta di designarla e di esprimerla.”54 The question is essential, not only because it raises the issue of the speaker’s *control* over what is spoken (ἀλλὰ πῶς ὁ ἀκουόν τὸ ἀυτὸ ἐννοήσει; “But how will the hearer have in mind [“represent,” “understand”] the same thing?” MXG 980b9; cf. Hel. 11),55 but because it puts into doubt the logical identity of *logos*. But first, let us consider what evidence there is in *Helen* that might support the thesis about the reality and power of *logos*. A closer inspection of the speech might at the same time help shed more light on the connection, or rather distance, between *logos* and its effects.

The “bodily” impingement of *logos* on the soul, the topic of 8-14, is the obvious place to look, but it disappoints. Gorgias simply fails to spell out the physiology by and through which language is presumed to operate psychologi-

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53. Cf. Calogero (1977) 252–53: “Il λόγος appare eterogeneo non solo alla sfera della realtà oggetto della vista ma anche a quella della realtà oggetto dell’udito . . . (e percepire non si può se non in tal modo, nell’immediata esperienza sensibile).” Cf. Kerferd (1985) 605: “Unfortunately no account survives of how Gorgias supposed the transition occurs from sense-impression to related λόγος”—or, it must be added, *back again*, from language to sensible or psychic impressions. Despite their best intentions, Kerferd (1981b) 324 (“of course it is not the *meaning* of the shouted word which has [its] effect, only its sound acting as a kind of trigger”) and Newiger (1973) 176 (“findet der λόγος aber eine Stütze in der Wahrnehmung, so ist er nicht mehr ohnmächtig”; cf. 183) reveal just how problematical accounting for this mechanism is.


55. Cf. MXG 980b19: “No one thinks [ἐννοεῖ] the same thing as anyone else.”
cally. Couched, like so much of *On Not-Being*, in the hypothetical mood (“If it was *logos* that persuaded Helen and deceived her in her soul . . .”), these paragraphs appear to offer, now through sheer assertion, a theory of persuasion based on some kind of particle theory of matter and a theory of impressions. In 8 we read that *logos* somehow carries out its effects either “by means of” or “in” the smallest and most invisible body (ομικροτάτῳ σώματι). In 9, poetry is said to encourage an identification in the audience with the deeds represented: “Through words, the soul experiences its own suffering [ὅδιον τι πάθημα], in the face of alien events and bodies [ἐπ’ ἄλλοτριών τε πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων].” The “communing” (συγγίνεσθαι) of the power of verbal incantation with opinion in the soul is described in 10. In the light of *On Not-Being*, are this “identification” and this “communing” really so unproblematical? In the latter case of communing, the real question is not whether or even how the fusion can occur, but whether these two natures, “linguistic power” and “opinion,” can be distinguished.

In 14 we are told that the effect of *logos* impinges directly on the τάξεις (arrangement, structure, condition) of the soul, by analogy with the effects of drugs (τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον ἔχει ἢ τὸν λόγου δύναμις, κτλ.): some words instill pain, others fear, still others give pleasure, and so on. Here, *logos* uncomfortably does double duty, figuring once in the *definiendum* (the *logos* in question) and once in the *definiens* (the *logos* governing, analogically, the various terms). A theory of visual “impressions” in 15–17 gives by analogy an account of the imprints of persuasion on the psychic disposition of the hearer, as in 13: “Persuasion impresses [ἐνιπάτερα] the mind [ψυχήν] as it wishes.” But here in 15–17, the reference is to the visual stimuli of desire, not to those of verbal persuasion, even though the two accounts share the same language (τυποῦσα, 15). The explicit analogies threaten to collapse into one general analogy; only, why assume that all the models stand in the service of persuasion and not in the service of some more diffuse sort of pathology?\(^{56}\)

The mechanisms by which *logos* is translated into its effects are anything but self-evident, and they seem to advertise their fictional or metaphorical status. Their crossing-over into other domains is literally a category mistake. Is Gorgias’s materialism a metaphor? If not, then his account has too many shortcomings to name. If it is, then this makes Gorgias’s own account a metaphor—but of what? Surely not of a literal account of persuasion: this only takes us back to square one. The very assertion of a scientific or other theory that could “account” for the psychology and physiology of *logos* runs up against Gorgias’s own methodological skepticism as voiced within *Helen* itself. One need only think of the scathing indictment of astronomers, speechwriters, and philosophers in *Helen* 13. Similarly, the premises of *On Not-Being* explicitly rule out any declara-

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\(^{56}\) Gorgias’s theory of the *kairos* appears to have implied vagueness and analogy, not precision and certainty; see Süss (1910), 18–25 (“Erfassung der Imponderabilien,” 21), 55. But Süss’s position is not entirely consistent; cf. 59. See further Cole (1991) 148, 151, where the limits of the rhetor’s “control” and “power” are well brought out.
tive, nonself-questioning approaches to what "is" the case, or can be predicted to be so, once empirical sensations are posited (for these cannot, strictly speaking, be described). A recent extrapolation of the autonomy thesis attempts to credit Gorgias with a "behavioristic" theory of language. 57 Like the thesis it naturally culminates, it cannot be deduced from either treatise alone, but this time the chief inspiration is inversely taken to be the "physiological" passages of Helen. Nevertheless, the message from On Not-Being is clear: even if there were an empirical basis for correlating verbal stimuli and affective responses, the theory would never be verifiable, for example, by tracking down causalities to their (putative) external source; there is no linguistic criterion available that could give us their measure (not to say communicate them): language cannot exhibit what lies outside language (fr. B 3 [84–85]). A "science" of affect would be a science of the unknown and the unknowable: καί ἣν τι, τοῦτο ἀγνωστόν τε καὶ ἄνεπινόητόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώπω (fr. B 3 [77]; cf. MXG 980b17). But then, by what faculty or "organ" (δύγανον) is logos "taken in"? For these reasons, it is improbable that the tantalizing bits that come down to us through various sources on Gorgias point, ultimately, to any positive theory of the physical world. At best they attest to Gorgias's intense "interest" in such speculation, 58 just as On Not-Being demonstrates, in its way, an intense interest, but no positive one, in metaphysical speculation. "Psychology," then, is as much an oxymoron for Gorgias as "meteorology" is. "Conventionalism" (the view that beliefs are habitual) rather than "behaviorism" captures to some degree the spirit of Gorgias's analysis of human behavior (cf. Hel. 16). 59 But not even this exhausts Gorgias's analysis, or his argumentative strategies.

By problematizing the relation of language and reality, Gorgias problematizes each of the two terms. 60 The promised autonomy and power of a faculty (such as language) in its "proper" domain can be measured only against its deficiencies relative to other powers in other domains, or to the heterogeneities it cannot control even in its own. We know what logos isn't; so what is it? Above we repeatedly saw how logos is not only not identifiable with "the outside"; it is not identical or reducible to itself. The logos that Gorgias is using to construct his (or rather, our) aporia is in some sense utterly irreducible. Signs of this irreducibility are to be found in Helen, where logos consistently appears under changing guises but never as itself, as in 2, where both persuasion and reason are explicitly said to be superadded to logos: "by introducing [impARTING] some reasoning into my speech/the story [ἐγὼ δὲ βούλομαι λογισμόν τινα τῷ

57. Mourelatos (1987); cf. esp. 135–36.
59. Cf. also Segal (1962) 103.
60. Logos (communication) and reality, not to mention sensation and thought, are literally reduced to the condition of an "aporia" (παρὰ τῶν τῷ Γοργία ἡπορημένων, B 3 [87]; cf. MXG 980b20, ἀπορία). Considerations of space prevent me from treating Gorgias's problematizing of sensation; on pragmata and pragmatics, see the next section; thought was briefly discussed above.
λόγῳ δούσι,” and in 13: “persuasion, when added to [or: “when it comes toward”] logos [ἡ πειθω προσσοῦσα (AX: προσσοῦσα, Blass) τῷ λόγῳ]”; just as in 9 poetry is defined as “logos plus [having] meter,” and as in 8 logos is not strictly reducible to the σῶμα (body) it activates (either as its instrument or its locus): it achieves its affects by means of or in smallest body (ομικροτάτῳ σώματί . . . ἐφα γὰρ ἀποτελεῖ), without being identical with its instrument or its place of activity. Gorgias appears to be going out of his way to distinguish logos from its effects, its instruments, its correlates, its contents, and its material expressions. This would cohere well with Calogero’s observation quoted above, namely that for Gorgias there is no intrinsic or necessary correlation in logos between verbal content (by which Calogero appears to mean sound or articulation) and cognitive content, between “the concrete and immediate sensible experience” of language and “the logos with which referring and expression are attempted.” Calogero fails to draw out the implications of Gorgias’s position, which has not entirely been correctly stated by him (logos is, after all, the referring and the expression; it is also the expressed). The two aspects of logos, verbal and cognitive content, are not just joined by an arbitrary link; they point to a radical gap between logos and its own contents. This is where the autonomy thesis and its implications finally meet: if logos (as defined according to Gorgias’s prescriptions) cannot communicate the contents of an outer reality, it is not just because the two realities are incommensurable, as it is standardly assumed, but because logos can only fail to communicate the inner reality of logos, its very own contents, since in the final analysis logos has no measurable relationship either to its own material expression (viz., its “distortion”) or to its undistorted reflex (whatever that may be). The logos that exists prior to its attributes (a so-called “objective” logos) is the only logos that can be said to function autonomously. But its very idea is manifestly incoherent. Gorgias’s analysis would appear to invite this rigorous isolation of logos from its contents in order to provoke the paradox we have just reached, and the incoherencies that ensue from it.

But why, one may ask, should Gorgias have conceived the paradox in this way? A brief answer might be that Gorgias is constructing a parodic counter to Parmenidean monism, which likewise calls for an absolute autonomy (of Being), but, Gorgias felt, with disastrous results. The moral of that demolition needs, in turn, to be applied to Gorgias’s own conception of language—the view of it that he presents and the self-refutation it implies. Logos, so conceived and in Gorgias’s eyes, is the dramatization of the not-being of Being. A “being” that cannot be equivalent to its “phenomenalizations,” its apparitions or instantiations (these only falsify its substance and identity), logos begins to take on the aspect of

61. This “confusion” caused Guthrie (1971) 50, more honest here than most, to postulate two “forces” acting on Helen, speech and persuasion, but their dilemma is Gorgias’s point.

62. The term “objective logos” is Calogero’s (1977: 258); the incoherencies entailed by this notion are acknowledged on p. 260. See Mansfeld (1985) 256, Mourelatos (1987) 138, 150, for different views on the problem of “self-difference” raised by Gorgias.
Parmenidean Being, however this is understood. On the other hand, the \textit{logos} we have described is not an analogue of Parmenidean Being, but its negation. Such a \textit{logos} has no identity, because it refuses positive identification: name what it is not as long as you like, but you will never come to what it is.

Of course, Gorgias felt the same to be true about Parmenidean Being. In contrast to Being, \textit{logos} may enjoy a certain autonomy, but not sovereignty or lack of contingency; at the very least, its pseudo-identity is contingent upon its difference from sensible \textit{pragmata}, but also from thought—and this goes right against the heart of Parmenidean metaphysics, which posits the identity of Being and thought (cf. Parm. DK 28 B 8.34). The poignancy of this difference may be telling: it is tempting to see in Gorgias’s \textit{logos} an implied commentary on the unpersuasiveness and inconceivability, not to say incommunicability, of Parmenidean Being, the consequences of which Parmenides either sought to evade or else knew but failed, in Gorgias’s eyes, to expose sufficiently in all its painful aporia. If so, then Gorgias is in a sense merely closing the gap that Parmenides had already opened by inviting speculation on the relation between truth and persuasion (for the true way of Being is that of Persuasion, Πηθώ, who “attends upon” Truth; Parm. fr. B 2.4; cf. B 1.29–30), which in turn opens a provocative gap between conceptuality and conceivability. \textit{Logos} is situated somewhere in their midst, a troubling, nagging question mark, like Helen.

\textbf{PERSUASION OR SEDUCTION?}

The “Helen” exculpated by Gorgias is the Helen who was not, a phantom of herself. This leaves Helen—the real Helen—in a precarious state indeed. But then, the thesis of persuasion remains precariously suspended too. A reading of \textit{Helen} that ignores its literary implications clearly won’t do: looking even beyond its \textit{ποιητική φράσις} (DK 82 A 29–32), the speech is formally too complex, too artfully designed, and too full of poetic allusion (its own composition, by way of

63. Gorgias did not invent this kind of parasitical argument. Cf. Cherniss (1975) 22–27 on Gorgias’s non-Eleatic predecessors’ “applied” Parmenideanism. For the view that Parmenides’ monism may not have been ontological but only logical (whatever “is” is internally unified and logically self-identical), see Curd (1991). Gorgias’s reply is that nothing that is answers to either description (logical or ontological).

64. Gorgias can, in other words, and perhaps should be associated with an “ultra-Parmenideanism” (Guthrie 1972: 196) gone purposely askew. Cf. Cassin (1980) 67–68, who, however, goes to an extreme in reductionism (98).

65. On material supports to monism as “the ladder which must be thrown away,” see Owen (1975) 57, 67; Cassin (1980) 60 (Parmenides’ “true” road is contingent upon the negation of the false road); and Williams (1981) 220. For arguments in favor of Parmenides’ poem as a form of self-induced aporia, see Mackenzie (1982).

66. This is another point of comparison between the two thinkers that deserves to be explored further. In Parmenides, four aspects of Being are enumerated (compulsion, fate, justice, persuasion); the fact of their seductiveness (\textit{erôs}) is implied (cf. Mourelatos 1970: 160–63). These features are repeated in distorted form in Gorgias.
its plural narrations, constitutes one of these allusions). Nor will a straightforward reading of Gorgianic persuasion do either. Why assume that Gorgias is literally out to persuade us of the virtues of persuasion, when he may in fact be out to play upon the conventions of persuasion that are already rife and well established in the sophistic culture of his age? (Targets are not far to seek: one thinks in particular of the paid speech writers, the logographoi; cf. Hel. 13, especially λόγος...τέχνη γραφείς, οὖν ἀληθεία λεχθεῖς.) Why, indeed, assume that Gorgias belongs unequivocally to that culture (unless we have misgauged the sophists, and they were, like Gorgias, radically self-questioning minds)?

There is a self-canceling and “dissuasive” character to his speech that needs to be reckoned with. It emerges at certain moments of self-deflection, whenever Gorgias diverts us from the thesis at hand (this is perhaps his commonest mode of argument), or at certain moments of self-inflection, whenever Gorgias openly jeopardizes his own credibility with a “surplus” of persuasiveness, as in 2, concerning the excessively “unanimous” tradition on Helen, and in a passage like that from 11, ὅσοι δὲ ὀσοὺς περὶ ὀσων καὶ ἔπεισαν καὶ πείθουσι δὲ ψεύδη λόγον πλάσαντες, “How many have persuaded and do persuade how many people about how many things by fabricating a false logos!” (or “Whoever persuaded anyone about anything...”), where Gorgias tells us “too much” about his profession—or in his four accounts of the nonevent of Helen, which simply give too many reasons why Helen “did what she did.”

Again, Gorgias’s writings work both within and outside the discourses and genres they mimic in order to defamiliarize. This is self-evidently true for On Not-Being, in which Gorgias is said to have fashioned some arguments “like Zeno” and others “like Melissus,” in addition to supplying his own (MXG 979a22–24). The same holds for Helen and Palamedes. Isocrates, who saw genre confusion in Helen, is to be trusted in this case: “[Gorgias] claims to have written an encomium of [Helen], but he has actually given a defense of her conduct” (Isoc. Hel. 14). Gorgias knew how to exploit the difference when he wanted to (Pal. 32). He also knew how to flout convention. To reduce his texts to rhetorical displays (with or without a “practical” purpose) is to diminish their thrust, to render them harmless, and tame. Gorgias, I am suggesting, was an outrageous figure. He was thoroughly drilled in critical rigor, and willing to

67. The role played by the metaphor of “magic” in his speech alone is the sign of a recalci-

trance, and possibly a critical one, toward the spirit of late fifth-century rationalism (on which, Lloyd 1979 passim). Dodds (1959) 6–7 musters arguments that do indeed show Gorgias’s distance from the common run of sophists. But if the distance were a self-critical one, we might still count Gorgias among them. His clear-eyed recognition that rational, public beliefs are often formed around some irrational core does not make him an irrationalist.

68. Gorgias’s Epitaphios, which has perplexed interpreters too, shows similar signs of relati-

vization from within a genre. In Loraux’s words, it “crystallizes in itself the ambiguity of a whole genre,” in addition to introducing typically sophistic elements. See Loraux (1986) 225–29.

69. It is often supposed that his argument is a schematic aide-mémoire aimed at unrestricted future applications; see Cole (1991) 76.
expose not only what today we might call philosophical and ideological assumptions in literature (and rhetoric), and literary, rhetorical, and ideological assumptions in philosophy, but also the pragmatic assumptions of his own rhetorical situation. It makes no sense to argue that Gorgias demystified the world of pragmata just so as to be able to remystify language. But it might well be the case that the possibility and the fallacy of such a remystification is one against which Gorgias’s writings serve to warn us, in our traffic with day-to-day constructions of the real. Recall that Gorgias dismissed the identity logic of Parmenides (itself approaching mysticism), while endorsing a doctrine of the reality—which is not to say truth—of appearances, one that does not look to some hidden metaphysical causation behind them (MXG 980a12–14; cf. fr. B 3 [81]). Or that he could argue, with wry skepticism, that “no one thinks the selfsame thoughts as anyone else” (980b19)—a tough proposition for any hopeful rhetor, but also a defiant motto for a free and critical thinker.

Helen, for Gorgias, is not to be approached as a mystery, but only as a symptom of his fellow Greeks’ mentalities. She is the literary equivalent of a utopic void, a κενόν (in Aeschylean parlance, a φάσμα; in Euripidean language, a κενή δόξης; in Gorgias-speak, pure δόξα). The “void” that appears implicitly in Gorgias’s Helen is one that, aptly, receives no direct name, is undetectable, and is all-pervasive. It is what gives body to Helen, and what takes body away from her. It might be equivalent to “desire”; or else it is pure seduction. Both are in any case opposed to persuasion.

Implicitly founding his speech on the antithesis of seduction (fascination) and persuasion, Gorgias, I have been suggesting, “demonstrates” how the one can be had only in exchange for the other’s absence. Persuasion confirms, retroactively and transferentially, a belief that a subject already possesses (cf. Hel. 5: “To tell those who know what they know carries conviction but gives no pleasure”);70 in consequence, persuasion exerts only the dead fascination of a lost and found object. Seduction is this fascination with loss. Here we must reckon with the fact that seduction can operate through a kind of nonpersuasion, and even by projecting images of its own loss and impotence (the way the promise of nonseductiveness, too, can be seductive). Here, however, seduction is not equivalent to erōs (the inherited congeries of ideas and associations that erōs has become in Greek culture), because seduction as fascination has a broader meaning: it applies tout court to the set of beliefs and desires that operate on the whole of Greek culture and that give that culture its consistency, despite its contradictions and its myths, and even at times because of these things (thus, Hesiod, Theog. 224, where Apatē, daughter of Night, is made sibling to Love, is just a part of this culture, not the key to it). Seduction, in other words, pertains to beliefs and desires that enable culture to be read, to be effective, and to have

70. This conception of “transference” has been elaborated recently by Žižek (1989). It lies at the core of Gorgias’s project.
“reality.” Gorgias’s encomium works in the same way: it is a piece of the culture to which Gorgias belongs, and it is a reading of that culture too. But more than anything else, it is a reading of the way in which cultural mélanges of facts and myths nonetheless exert a real effect on those who are immersed in them, who lend culture credibility just by participating in it. The place of seduction, its source of power, lies in this “nonetheless.”

Logos is one name for this seduction. Above we saw how for Gorgias to be in language, which means to inhabit culture and its conventions, is to be deceived. Just to use language is to participate in this deception. To assume that logos means something above and beyond this fundamentally constitutive state of mind and culture is to enter into a new level of mystification, but it is not to exit from the “vicious” circle of deception. The pretense that logos can point beyond deception is one of the many lures and traps held out by Gorgias’s writing. Let us view Gorgias’s speech as I think he would have us view it, namely as a model and microcosm of this cultural dynamic. The Encomium of Helen enacts, as in a theater, the conditions of knowing, opining, and desiring—of the power that is promised but not necessarily granted by cultural habits and assumptions. Looked at as a discourse that is performed, but one that also performatively “unsays” itself, Gorgias’s rhetorical display is simultaneously the display of a phantom: it mimes the attributes of power, the structures of desire that motivate power, and the structures of belief that sustain it. By naming this phantom “Helen,” by turning her active powers (Éνευργήσεσθαι, 4) into passions wrought against her (ὥδε ἔπαθε, 7), Gorgias turns power, allegorically, against itself.71 Power is further circumscribed by the disparity of its accounts (the fact of its essential contestation) and the uncertainty of its effects. Here too Gorgias’s own rhetoric is an analogon for the power it claims to wield (the power of persuasive tactics); how odd that its activity should consist chiefly in the limitations it puts on itself, and in the freedom (to gainsay, to disbelieve) it grants to its audience. Logos can no more be grasped or controlled than can the cultural coordinates that may turn out to define its position. Positioned as much as positioning, communication will always bear the signs of its imperfectness (just as logos is “composed,” συνίσταται, of what it is not; fr. B 3 [85]). These signs, which are situational indices and moments of powerlessness, can be read or ignored. Choosing one or the other is tantamount to choosing demystification or mystification.

This does not make Gorgias a nihilist or a nominalist, but only someone who is acutely aware of the constructed and conventional, the contingent and the nonautonomous nature of discourse—and of its critical possibilities. Gorgias’s starting assumption, which he everywhere advertises, is that to take a stance is to

71. Not to mention the erotic, bewitching effects of Helen’s speech, a traditional facet of her personality since Homer (cf. esp. Od. 4, but also Iliad 3: her capacity to “name”), or her association with pharmaka (Od. 4). Gorgias does not suppress so much as he quietly alludes to these things.
occupy a position, to enter into a game (a παίγνιον), to invite others to join complicitously in this enterprise, and to risk control over its stakes. The stakes are culturally defined, like the positions that Gorgias sketches in; but by rhetorically inhabiting these positions, and by flaunting this occupancy, Gorgias directs attention to the logic of their relations, and to their reversibility. His argument is vulnerable, like Helen, and blatantly false besides. Herein lies, I would suggest, its seductive power: the speech absorbs all meaning through a kind of attraction; meaning is drawn to its limit conditions as if by a vacuum, and then returned as a shared, complicitous illusion. Let us pause for a moment to consider what this complicity means.

We can begin by taking the figure of Helen, who both represents the seductiveness of speech and is one of its products. Helen seduces, we might say, because we know that she is supposed to be erotic and ambivalent, but not because she is these things. She seduces us as an uneventful circulation of signs, which attract us not by their promise of depth, but by their very exposure as the horizon of meaning and the play of surfaces. On this view, it is not the indeterminacy of signs that fascinates, but their absence of significance, their loss of determinate or indeterminate meaning. Helen is this loss.

Here, Gorgias's grip on us, if he has any at all, is the concession he makes to the fact that he has no grip, and no designs, on us; he merely presents us with an "insignificant" text, which seduces—to the extent that it does—by surrendering the illusion of its mastery over us, or of its persuasiveness, in exchange for the real power of seduction. Such is the banality of belief: one can afford not to believe in an illusion because one knows that others do believe in it, in which case belief is merely displaced; it is enjoyed from a distance. Depending upon how one reacts, a reader or hearer of Gorgias's text will either be taken in by this trap, complicitously (even half-consciously) sustaining its empty but open fictions, or become critically aware of its pleasures and dangers—or both. E. R. Dodds ominously comments that "Gorgias set men's feet on the road to tyranny without warning them that the tyrant is of all men the most unhappy." But if anything, Gorgias is warning his audience that the tyrant is in every man, because tyranny lies in the seductive illusion of power, an illusion that, in the case of rhetoric, is nourished and sustained by the hearer. The possibilities for critical

72. Cf. DK 82 A 1a (Philost. 1.1), κινδύνευμα.
73. Rosenmeyer's fine distinction is crucial, and much overlooked: "I think it is fair to say, in the light of On Not-Being, that in Gorgias' usage the logos is apatelos [deceptive] primarily in its relation to a supposed subject matter, and only secondarily in its effects upon the audience" (1955: 233; emphasis added). To complete the logic, in Gorgias supposition is an effect that speaking and hearing subjects have upon themselves.
74. See generally Mannoni (1968). Significantly, Dodds (1959) 8 can find no other argument to overturn Gorgias's moral authority than the restatement of his banality: his speeches "make the impression of a dazzling insincerity, an insincerity so innocently open as to be (except in the funeral oration) entirely void of offence."
75. Dodds (1959) 10.
and clear-sighted refusal are not denied, but neither is their foundation any firmer, or their actualization guaranteed.  

Gorgias once wrote (fr. B 23) that “the deceiver is more just than the one who fails to deceive, and the one who is deceived is wiser than one who fails to be deceived.” His own dictum is a bit deceptive, inasmuch as it suggests the separation of the deceiver and the deceived, when in fact these are for Gorgias one and the same subject: only the deceiver is ever deceived, and this is never more true than when he believes he can deceive those who are not already self-deceived.  

This may seem like quite a stretch. But according to Plato, Gorgias held this very doctrine: peithô works its “enslavement” not by force, but only on the “willing” and by their own will (δι’ ἐκόντων ἄλλ’ οὗ διὰ βίας, Phileb. 58a7–b2). We should grant Gorgias an insight that goes deeply into the human psyche, far beyond the surface paradox he presents. It is not just a statement that peithô works through the magic of illusion or by legerdemain, but that it caters to the delusions of human subjects who are infinitely capable of self-deception. The citizens of Greece are inevitably the accomplices of their culture.

Things needn’t, of course, always be so bleak. Self-deception is only the correlative of deception. The complications of pleasure, seduction, or just amusement, all accompanied by disbelief, are equally valid reactions, and are often indeed paradigms of the rhetorical situation from Homer onwards (Od. 13.287–301; 14.363–65; 14.508–10). Persuasion, in other words, is the superficial ideology of rhetoric; it is to be indulged or humored, but not to be taken seriously, whereas the beliefs that sustain (rather than produce) it are. Thus, the pretenses of persuasion, though they may sometimes reinforce the desire to persuade or even to be persuaded, also open onto a domain beyond persuasion. Gorgias’s Helen is a casebook demonstration of this principle, and, in its performative contradictions, which are passed on to and now embodied in the audience, a challenge. It is the hearer, not Gorgias, who—consciously or unconsciously—effects his or her own seduction, who empowers, or, if you like, seduces, Gorgias’s text. Perhaps Gor-

76. This obviously won’t diminish his appeal to those like Proxenus the Boeotian, who was drawn to Gorgias like Helen’s suitors, τὰ μεγάλα πράττειν ἰκανός (Xen. An. 2.6.16; cf. Hel. 4). We can be sure that he must have gone disappointed. Gorgias’s teaching guarantees nothing (Plat. Gorg. 457a).

77. Dio Chrysostom expresses pretty much the same idea, with a fabulous image that is both a variation and a commentary on the tradition of Helen. Cf. τὰ λοιπὰ ἡδίν ἔγγαμα ἑξεινοῦσιν [sc. Paris] ὡς ἑκτὸν τοῖσιν ἀληθῶς γεγονόσι, Or. 20.23.

78. See also Calogero (1957).

79. See Most (1989) 132–33; and note how in the examples cited it is again the speaker’s losses and disablement that compel a hearer’s interest. Generalizing, one might say that hearers are persuaded only insofar as they identify with a speaker’s real or imagined (projected, or just bespoken) losses.

80. See further Nietzsche’s shrewd observations on “letting oneself be deceived” in Beyond Good and Evil § 230.

81. Segal’s insight (1962: 122, 126) into “psychic complicity” in the sense of passive participation through pleasure and emotion can be extended: complicity clearly applies to cases of “deception” in the sense of willing (often unconscious) belief as well.
gias is seduced by his own absence of persuasive designs. Whatever the case, Gorgias's *logos* gains its sovereignty only by surrendering it. Its pharmaceutical powers are akin not to the application of drugs, but to fasting and negation. It achieves seduction by forfeiting persuasion and by engaging in a perverse "game" of dissuasion.82 This loss may best explain the fascination of Gorgias's *Helen*, which endures, despite its implausibility, or rather for just this reason. Whether the same holds for other fifth-century sophists still remains to be seen.

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82. It has been suggested to me that the game or diversion is Gorgias's own ("*my παίγνιον*"). If so, then the speech is an exercise in solipsism, not in communication, and least of all in persuasion. The irony, however, may be that "my game" conceals a self-canceling contradiction, inasmuch as no one owns or controls the game of *logos*. Finally, if Palamedes invented draughts, did he always win when he played "his" game? He certainly lost his last bid for life. This, incidentally, casts an ironic shadow on the speech that Gorgias imagines for us (fr. B 13), whatever its relation to Palamedes' original speech may be (whether recreation or substitute): we are as aware of the effort to persuade as we are of Palamedes' utter failure to achieve this goal. Yet one more sign of Gorgias's dissuasive strategy.
MXG. See Diels 1900.


