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**Defining Poetry, Defending Prose:
Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* §9 and Its Reception**

Gorgias is generally regarded today as the first theoretician of artistic prose in a period when poetry was far more prestigious. His theory of prose in connection with his definition of poetry is usually neglected in studies of his theory of language, despite the notable influence it exerted on Plato, Aristotle, and the rhetorical tradition, including his student Isocrates.

In the *Encomium of Helen* (§9), Gorgias characterizes all poetry as speech with meter (τὴν ποιήσιν ἅπασαν καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω λόγον ἔχοντα μέτρον). Many of the difficulties involved in interpreting this definition, and other statements surrounding it, are related to implications that Gorgias does not explicitly draw. He describes both the power of poetical speech and the similar power of speech (*logos*) as though he was arguing that the emotional power of oratory on the soul (fear, pity, longing, etc.) is equal in power to that of poetic speech. Indeed, he subsumes poetic speech under the larger category of *logos*. Does this imply a rivalry between prose and poetry? Other difficulties include the meaning of the word “meter” (*metron*) as employed here and its relationship with poetry (*poiēsis*). Is meter a mere external ornament? If so, does this underlying conception of speech do full justice to poetry's specificity? Where does the originality of Gorgias's definition lie? More generally, why is the rapprochement between poetry and prose of historical and philosophical importance?

In what follows I will first sketch the larger historical question concerning the transition from poetry to prose, then discuss Gorgias's definition of poetry, after which I will turn to its reception: first in Plato, then Aristotle, then in Gorgias's student Isocrates. In the following section I will argue that Gorgias's definition of poetry

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includes not only tragedy, but also epic, especially Homer. Finally, I will return to the larger question concerning the transition from poetry to prose by briefly examining Strabo's account of it. But first the immediate context of Gorgias's definition.

In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias defends the mythological figure against her accusers, and in so doing discusses and illustrates the power of *logos*. He provides four arguments in favor of Helen's case: she left her husband with Paris because she was the victim of either (i) the will of Fate and of the gods, (ii) physical force (*bia*), (iii) seducing speech (*logos*), or (iv) love (*erōs*). He explains the third reason, the irresistible power of speech, in the most detail (§8-14). To provide the immediate context of Gorgias's definition, I quote sections 8, 9 and part of 10 in Sprague's translation:

[8] But if it was speech [λόγος] which persuaded her and deceived [ἀπατήσας] her heart, not even to this is it difficult to make an answer and to banish blame as follows. Speech is a powerful lord [δυνάστης μέγας], which by means of the finest and most invisible body [σώματι] effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief [φόβον παῦσαι καὶ λύπην ἀφελεῖν] and create joy and nurture pity [ἔλεον ἐπαυξήσασαι]. I shall show [δείξω] how this is the case, since [9] it is necessary to offer proof to the opinion [δόξει] of my hearers [τοῖς ἀκούουσι]: I both deem and define all poetry as speech with meter [τὴν ποίησιν ἅπασαν καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω λόγον ἔχοντα μέτρον]. Fearful shuddering [φρίκη περιφοβος] and tearful pity [ἔλεος πολύδακρος] and grievous longing [πόθος φιλοπενθήης] come upon its hearers, and at the actions and physical sufferings of others [ἀλλοτρίων] in good fortunes and in evil fortunes, through the agency of words [διὰ τῶν λόγων], the soul is wont to experience a suffering of its own. [10] Sacred incantations [ἐπωδαί] sung with words are bearers of pleasure [ἡδονῆς] and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power [δύναμις] of the incantation is wont to beguile [ἔθελξε] it and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft [γοητεία].

The historical and philosophical importance of Gorgias's theory of speech (*logos*) as expounded in the *Encomium of Helen* is generally recognized. Edward Schiappa, for instance, considers it the "most theoretical in its treatment of persuasive *logos*" of the 5th century. Schiappa also notes the absence of the term *rhētorikē*, which we would expect here, as an indication of both the terminological and conceptual uncertainty in the 5th century about rhetorical theories, and therewith the slow transition "from *logos* to *rhētorikē*."² My paper has at once a more modest and more ambitious aim than that of following the fortune of concepts such as rhetoric or prose. I would like to concentrate on the meaning and implications of Gorgias's definition of poetry, in connection to both the larger question of the "move from poetry to prose" and the reception of that definition in few later writers, namely Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Strabo.

The Larger Question: The Transition from Poetry to Prose

Let me begin, then, with the "big picture" concerning the transition from poetry to prose. It is generally agreed that there are important connections between the emergence of artistic prose and the emergence of a more rational, secular, scientific outlook, often called the Greek Enlightenment, associated among others with the Sophists. This turn would involve the slow replacement of the traditional, mythic-poetic mode of thinking by the prose of the historians, orators, philosophers, etc.³ Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* explicitly claims to prove Helen's innocence by means of reasoning (*logismos* §2) and demonstration (*deixō* §8). He examines analytically the form and workings of speech.⁴ His analysis of the emotional impact of speech is based on a rational psychology making no appeal to divine will. While performing this analysis, however, he

² Edward Schiappa, "Did Plato Coin *Rhētorikē*?" *American Journal of Philology* (1990): 459, 463, 470. Cf. Thomas Cole, *The Origin of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 2, 12, 98-9.

³ Cf. Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa: Vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance*, erster Band, dritter Abdruck (Leipzig, Berlin: Teubner, 1915), 20.

⁴ Edward Schiappa, *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1999), 114-32.

simultaneously illustrates the power of his own performance-prose. His prose refers emphatically to, and depends upon, the spoken word. His prose composition is still very much part of an oral culture. He addresses his audience as “my hearers” (§9). The young Friedrich Nietzsche in his lecture notes on the *History of Greek Literature* (1874–1876) defends a theory which finds approval only later, such as in Eric Havelock’s work,⁵ namely that poetry is the expression of an oral culture, while prose is based on a literate culture. Nietzsche unduly insists, however, on the opposition of two types of culture, supposing that some kind of radical break separated them, a view for which Havelock has also been criticized. Ultimately the replacement of poetry means the replacement of orality.⁶ This movement was, however, gradual and slow in the 5th and 4th century BCE. Gorgias’s written prose is part of the transitional period leading from one to the other.⁷

Gorgias’s Definition of Poetry and Its Difficulties

Gorgias’s definition of poetry raises several questions. What is the relationship between poetry and prose? What are the boundaries between them? What is the significance and novelty of his definition? And does it do justice to poetry’s specificity? Let us recall that the concept of prose, in Gorgias, is expressed simply by the term *logos*. Later the notion will be specified as *pezos logos*, *pezos* meaning “on foot, walking,” hence prosaic, ordinary. Contrary to many later writers, Gorgias establishes a prose-poetry distinction, although he does not maintain it consistently. As we have seen in *Encomium* §9, Gorgias defines poetry as speech containing “meter”: “I both deem and define all poetry as speech with meter [τὴν ποιήσιν ἄπασαν καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω λόγον ἔχοντα].”

⁵ Havelock oddly enough never quotes Nietzsche in his 1963 book, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1963), although he does so in *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 266; cf. 312.

⁶ Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 8.

⁷ Cf. Edward Schiappa, “Twenty-Five Years after ‘Did Plato Coin *Rhētorikē*?’: An Episodic Memoir,” *Rhetoric Review* 35 (2016): 6.

MacDowell in his commentary writes: “Scholars who object that poetical style differs from oratorical style are making too much of the passage; Gorgias does not here enter into the question of style, but is just saying – what is undeniably true – that poetry, like oratory, uses words.”⁸ This means that poetry has the powerful effects it has not *qua* poetry but *qua* logos.⁹ What is the exact meaning of *metron*? Liddell and Scott say: “meter,” and “[in opp[osition to] μέλος (music) and ῥυθμός (time).” This lexical entry includes references to Aristophanes’s *Clouds* (v. 638, 641) and Plato’s *Gorgias* (502c).¹⁰ Greek meter differs from modern verse in being quantitative, based on patterns of long and short syllables, such as in the dactylic hexameter of Homeric poetry. The relationship between *metron* and *rhythmos* would thus consist in the fact they are the two necessary components for a complete formal classification of a verse.

Is this definition new or does it rather reflect the common conception at the time? There are reasons to suppose it is meant as intentionally novel. Gorgias’s emphatic phrasing “I both deem and define [καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω]” does seem to insist with pride on his originality.¹¹ Moreover, it might be the very first example of a definition as procedure.¹² Some commentators claim, on the contrary, that Gorgias is here referring to a traditional (or conventional) understanding of poetry. Gorgias would be appealing to “his

⁸ Douglas Maurice MacDowell, ed., *Gorgias, Encomium of Helen* (Bristol: Classical Press, 1982), 37; likewise, Penelope Murray, “Introduction,” in *Classical Literary Criticism*, tr. P. Murray and T.S. Dorsch (London, New York: Penguin, 2000), xxi.

⁹ Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 178.

¹⁰ Aristophanes, *Clouds*, ed., trans. and commentary Kenneth J. Dover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 178-9 on *Clouds* v. 638.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Mario Untersteiner, *I Sofisti*, presentazione di Fernanda Declava Caizzi (Milano: B. Mondadori, 2008 [1968]), 99.

¹² Cf. Edward Schiappa, “Toward a Predisciplinary Analysis of Gorgias’ *Helen*,” in *Theory, Text, Context. Issues in Greek Rhetoric and Oratory*, ed. C. Johnstone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 82, id. “Rethorical Theory,” 127; Giombini, *Gorgia epidittico*, 132-3; Roberta Ioli, *Gorgia, Testimonianze e frammenti* (Roma: Carocci, 2013), 228.

audience's shared preconceptions."¹³ Immediately before giving that definition, Gorgias says "it is necessary to offer proof to the opinion (δόξη) of my hearers" (§9).¹⁴ At any rate, his definition differs from the traditional understanding of poetry in at least two respects: it is purely formal and sets aside truth claims as well as morality, and it excludes inspiration from the Muse.¹⁵ Indeed, this definition is the first attempt at describing the whole of poetry from a formal point of view, highlighting what according to Gorgias constitutes poetry's specific difference from other forms of discourse.¹⁶ Plato's Socrates in the *Gorgias* takes up this definition in very similar words: "Well then, if one stripped away from the whole composition [τῆς ποιήσεως πάσης] both melody [μέλος], rhythm [ῥυθμὸν], and meter [μέτρον], does it turn out that what's left is only speeches [λόγοι]?" (*Gorgias* 502c5-7; ed. Burnet; trans. Zeyl).¹⁷

In Plato's rendering, too, poetry is equated with *logos* without meter. The difference in formulation, in comparison to that of Gorgias, might be helpful, even if from a later date. Socrates lists *metron* in company with *melos* and *rhythmos*. The exact relationship between *metron* and *rhythmos* is not so easy to determine. *Melos* means "song," which includes words, tune, and rhythm. In general, as Gerald Else notes, "*metron* means 'verse,' including speech and rhythm." So *metron* could be translated as "verse," bearing in mind,

¹³ Denis C. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 25.

¹⁴ Cf. Donald Andrew Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 23.

¹⁵ Cf. Jacqueline de Romilly, "Gorgias et le pouvoir de la poésie," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 155-62.

¹⁶ Jonas Schollmeyer, *Gorgias' ›Lobrede auf Helena‹ Literaturgeschichtliche Untersuchungen und Kommentar* (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2020), "§ 9 Funktion und Gedankengang" (Kindle edition, 2021).

¹⁷ Cf. *Republic* X, 601b1-b4: "so great [μεγάλην] is the natural charm of these things—that he [*scil.* the poet] speaks with meter, rhythm, and harmony [ἐν μέτρῳ καὶ ῥυθμῷ καὶ ἀρμονίᾳ] for if you strip [γυμνωθέντα] a poet's works of their musical colorings [τῶν τῆς μουσικῆς χρωμάτων] and take them by themselves, I think you know what they look like" (trans. Grube rev. Reeve).

however, that its meaning changes according to context.¹⁸ I will come back to the question of rhythm.

Other difficulties in Gorgias's *Encomium* concern its unstated implications. Is polemic implied on his part? When he declares that meter distinguishes poetry from prose, does he mean "and nothing else," with the intention of enhancing the prestige of oratory?¹⁹ Moreover, is Gorgias implying that oratory, that is simple speech without music or meter, can be as powerful as poetry?²⁰ If this is so, as seems to be the case, it would be the first time such a claim is made on behalf of oratory. Furthermore, does Gorgias's definition of poetry and his praise of its power imply that prose writers are entitled to exploit all the resources of the poet's language, except meter? Gorgias does seem to put prose in direct rivalry with poetry in that fashion.²¹ Contrary to his pupil Isocrates's strict rule that prose must only use common words, Gorgias uses poetic words, as well as figures of speech (*schēmata*),²² presumably as substitutes for meter.²³

¹⁸ Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 62, 66. *Metron* is generally translated as "meter" (*Versmaß*). But for Schollmeyer, *Gorgias*, "§9 Funktion und Gedankengang," *metron* as meter is rare in the 5th century. Aristotle seem to see *metron* as including both *logos* and *rhythmos*. Charles P. Segal, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962): 150n102 regards as possible that *metron* has "a wider range of meaning [...] referring to all the measured qualities, of which Greek poetic expression [...] is capable." Gorgias does not make that claim but affirms, in the case of both poetry and prose, an intimate relationship between form and effect.

¹⁹ Cf. Victor Bers, *Greek Poetic Syntax in the Classical Age* (London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 1.

²⁰ Cf. Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: from The Beginnings to the End of The Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 48.

²¹ Cf., e.g., Schollmeyer, *Gorgias*, "§9 Funktion und Gedankengang."

²² Such as antithesis, assonance and alliteration, as well as poetic vocabulary made of rare, foreign words and neologisms.

²³ Cf. Friedrich Blass, *Die attische Beredsamkeit. Erste Abtheilung: von Gorgias bis zu Lysias* (Teubner, Leipzig: Zweite Auflage, 1887), 63.

Aristotle: Meter as Non-Essential Difference

Aristotle claims at the beginning of his *Rhetoric* (III, 1404a24) that artistic prose began with a poetic style, and he cites the example of Gorgias. Aristotle is critical of the use of rare, poetic words in prose:

And as the poets, although their utterances were devoid of sense [εὐήθη], appeared to have gained their reputation through their style [λέξις], it was a poetical style [ποιητική] that first came into being, as that of Gorgias.²⁴ Even now, the majority of the uneducated think that such persons express themselves most beautifully, whereas this is not the case, for the style of prose is not the same as that of poetry [ἀλλ' ἑτέρα λόγου και ποιήσεως λέξις ἐστίν] (*Rhetoric* III, 1404a24-29; ed. Ross; trans. Freese mod.).

A little later, Aristotle expresses partial agreement with Gorgias about meter as a distinct trait of poetry: "this is why prose must be rhythmical [ῥυθμὸν δεῖ ἔχειν], but not metrical [μέτρον δὲ μή], otherwise it will be a poem" (*Rhetoric* III, 1408b30; ed. Ross; trans. Freese mod.). Thus, according to Aristotle, prose may and even must have rhythm, as in the case of Thrasymachus's prose, as he mentions a little later (1409a2). Aristotle argues, however, that poetry's specific diction is distinct from that appropriate to prose.

In the *Poetics*, on the other hand, he opposes the received view that meter is the essential element in poetry (without referring to Gorgias): the *fundamental* distinction between the two would *not* lie in the meter, that is, in its form, but in its content, namely in mimesis, its mimetic object (1447b16-20). Is Aristotle's premise here that meter is a mere veil concealing the essence of poetry, that is its subject, mimetically portrayed? If *logos* is to have the same power as poetry, as Gorgias argues, the *specific* feature of poetry must be minimized, which implies treating *metron* "as an external ornament, not affecting the intrinsic qualities of the whole."²⁵ In other words, *metron* is superficial. Yet, from Gorgias's own formal viewpoint, does the

²⁴ See also Philostratus, *Lives of Sophists*, I, 9; Diodorus of Sicily XII, 53, 1-5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Composition* VI, 25, 7.

²⁵ Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity*, 23.

power of poetry, just as that of prose, not lie in its form? Gorgias, as Plato after him, regards the overpowering influence of poetry, rhetoric, and music on the soul as residing in the force of sheer sound. Generally, there is a tension in rhetorical and philosophical criticism in antiquity between content (mostly ethical) and form, that is between sense and sound, or between ethics and techniques. The latter is apparently rooted in Gorgias's case in materialistic conceptions of language, such as that of his teacher Empedocles and Democritus, who possibly influenced him. As Andrew Ford observes, the "classical approach to the split between sound and sense is, ideally, to harmonize the two."²⁶ This position is expressed, e.g., in Plato's *Cratylus* (387d4-7), which supposes a *natural* correspondence between name and meaning.

Isocrates: Meter for Poetry Alone, Rhythm for Prose Also

Gorgias's best-known student, Isocrates, takes a different view from Aristotle concerning the role of meter. Isocrates argues that meter *is* the essential, distinctive trait of poetry, that it is not an external feature, but is intrinsic to it. Without meter poetry would lose its power (*dynamis*).²⁷ This seems to contradict Gorgias's thesis according to which *logos*, by itself, is a great master. While Gorgias places poetry within prose, Isocrates keeps them apart. In addition to meter, other devices are poetry's prerogative alone.²⁸ In the *Antidosis* Isocrates discusses political, as opposed to private, forms of discourse, such as panegyric, to be delivered at the Pan-Hellenic assemblies (explicitly referring to his own):

[these] discourses which, as everyone will agree, are more akin to works composed in rhythm and set to music [ὁμοιοτέρουσ εἶναι τοῖς μετὰ μουσικῆς καὶ ῥυθμῶν πεποιημένοις] than to the speeches which are made in court [ἢ τοῖς ἐν δικαστηρίῳ λεγομένοις]. For they set forth facts in a style more imaginative and more ornate [ποικιλωτέρα]; they employ thoughts which are more lofty

²⁶ Ford, *Origins of Criticism*, 186-7.

²⁷ Isocrates, *Evagoras*, §11.

²⁸ Schollmeyer, *Gorgias*, "§9 Funktion und Gedankengang."

and more original [ὄγκωδεστέροις καὶ καινοτέροις χρῆσθαι ζητοῦσιν], and, besides, they use throughout figures of speech in greater number and of more striking character. All men take no less pleasure [χαίρουσιν οὐδὲν ἥττον] in listening to this kind of prose than in listening to poetry [ἢ τῶν ἐν τοῖς μέτροις πεποιημένων] (*Antidosis* 46-47; ed. and trans. Norlin mod.).

Isocrates thus presents a more complex account of the relationship between poetry and prose. According to him, artistic prose can enchant the audience just as much as poetry does, but its task is more difficult, because it lacks the psychagogic power of meter.

The challenge of writing prose would mainly lie in capturing the power of poetry while respecting the boundaries between the two forms. To that end, it has rhythm, as Aristotle also says.²⁹ Isocrates takes pride in his own use of harmonious rhythm (εὐρυθμία).³⁰ He underscores rhythm as prime condition of the power and charm of prose. In *Evagoras* he writes, “Nevertheless, although poetry has advantages so great [πλεονεκτούσης τῆς ποιήσεως], we must not shrink from the task, but must make the effort and see if it will be possible in prose to eulogize good men in no worse fashion [μηδὲν χειρόν] than their encomiasts do who employ song and verse [τῶν ἐν ταῖς ὠδαῖς καὶ τοῖς μέτροις ἐγκωμιαζόντων] (*Evagoras* 11; ed. and trans. Norlin). Isocrates thus maintains poetry’s superiority, due to meter, but considers rhythm as the principal means to approach its power of expression.³¹ Plato too, as we have seen, refers to the close connection among *metron*, *melos*, and *rhythmos*. The rhetorical tradition will largely maintain the position that prose should be rhythmical, but not metrical.³²

²⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, 1408b30-31; cf. Schollmeyer, *Gorgias*, “§9.”

³⁰ *To Philip*, 27. *Against the Sophists*, 13: εὐρύθμως καὶ μουσικῶς.

³¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Geschichte der griechischen Literatur,” in *Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe* II/5, ed. G. Colli, M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 27-32: “Prosa und Poesie in ihrem Unterschiede.”

³² Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Demosthenes* 50, *On Composition* 25 (cf. 11); Demetrius, *On Style* 180-81 (cf. 118); Cicero, *Orator* 187-88, 194, 198; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* IX, 4, 56-57, 60-61, 72, 77.

The Epic Tradition: Homer

In his account of the psychagogic power of speech, Gorgias includes references to the emotions of pity and fear, which has led many commentators to suppose that he had tragic rather than epic poetry in mind. Tragedy is certainly a key form of poetry in his account. His influence on Aristotle's understanding of tragedy, in terms of these two emotions, is also quite probable. Whether Gorgias, like Aristotle, associated pity and fear with purgation (*katharsis*), is another question. It is, however, a mistake to suppose that Gorgias is concerned exclusively with tragedy.

First, Gorgias's definition is meant to be universal: it includes all poetry. Second, as in the case of other sophists, Gorgias's oratory appeals to mythological narrative related to the Trojan war and thus to Homeric characters (Helen, Palamedes, etc.).³³ Third, the powerful emotions Gorgias evokes, such as grievous longing, are already portrayed in Homer. As Rana Saadi Liebert points out, the phrase "longing for lamentation" (Ἰμερος γόοιο) is frequent in Homer.³⁴ Fourth, the emotion of pleasure or delight (*terpsis*), the exclusive privilege of the poets until then, is typical of Homeric poetry (cf. *Od.* I, 347; VIII, 45). Fifth, Plato's view that epic and tragic poetry are fundamentally synonymous may derive from Gorgias or may be a common view at the time.³⁵ Both genres belong to high art capable of elevating the mind, and Aristotle too considers Homer's epic to be the first form of tragedy in its dramatic quality.³⁶

Finally, Plato's description of the rhapsode's emotional state and impact on the audience in the *Ion* (535c), when reciting Homer,

³³ See Paola Bassino and Nicolò Benzi (eds.), *Sophistic Views of the Epic Past from the Classical to the Imperial Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

³⁴ Rana Saadi Liebert, *Tragic Pleasure from Homer to Plato* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 109: Homer, *Iliad* XXIII, 14, 108, 153; XXIV, 507; *Odyssey* IV, 113, 183; X, 398; XVI, 215; XIX, 249.

³⁵ Plato, *Republic* 595a, 598d, 607a; *Theaetetus* 152e.

³⁶ *Poetics* 1448b35-37, 1449b9-10. Cf. Fritz R. Wehrli, "Der erhabene und der schlichte Stil in der poetisch-rhetorischen Theorie der Antike," in *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühl*, ed. Olof Gigon et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 1946), 17-8; Giuliana Lanata, *Poetica pre-platonica* (Firenze: Nuova Italia, 1963), 197.

involves very similar emotions to those to which Gorgias refers.³⁷ The importance of epic, Homeric poetry in Gorgias's oratory raises the larger question about his relationship to the oral-mythic tradition as a whole. Gorgias does not contest the stories about Helen's life; he uses them without changing them. As Stephen Halliwell suggests, it "looks, therefore, as though Gorgias is not simply rejecting poetic tradition but competing with it on its own terms. [...] He may adopt a stance of analytic 'reasoning' (*logismos*), but he nonetheless signals his wish to give his audience a deep pleasure which can match that to be expected of poetry itself."³⁸

Conclusion: Strabo's Account of the Transition

To conclude, let us return to the larger question concerning the overall transition from poetry to prose. The use of writing without meter has been felt and judged in antiquity as a daring enterprise, indeed by some, as a radical breach with tradition, that nevertheless established itself with time.³⁹ A very interesting account of the long and slow transition from poetic discourse to artistic prose can be found in the writings of the historian and geographer Strabo (c. 60 BCE-20 CE), who happens to be an unconditional admirer of Homer. After criticizing Eratosthenes's view of poetry as entertainment, Strabo defends poetry as a source of knowledge as well as of pleasure. He then presents his account of how poetry first reigned supreme, then competed with prose, until it was replaced by it.

³⁷ 535c5-8: (Ion) ἐγὼ γὰρ ὅταν ἐλείνῳν τι λέγω, δακρῶν ἐμπίμπλανται μου οἱ ὀφθαλμοί· ὅταν τε φοβερὸν ἢ δεινόν, ὄρθαι αἱ τρίχες ἴστανται ὑπὸ φόβου καὶ ἡ καρδία πηδᾶ. Cf. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity*, 23.

³⁸ Stephen Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 271-2. On Gorgias's stylistic borrowings from Homer, see A. Nieschke, *De Thucydide Antiphontis discipulo et Homeri imitatore* (Münden: Klugkist, 1885), A. Nieschke, *De figurarum, quae vocantur σχήματα Γοργίεια, apud Herodotum usu* (Münden: Klugkist, 1891), and Karl Reich, *Der Einfluss der griechischen Poesie auf Gorgias den Begründer der attischen Kunstprosa* (Würzburg: Universitätsdruckerei, 1907-1909), 19-27.

³⁹ Michael Erler, "Philosophie," in *Handbuch der griechischen Literatur der Antike*, ed. Bernhard Zimmermann (München: Beck, 2011), 261.

But is not language a generality [ὁ λόγος ἐστὶ γενικός], of which poetry and prose are forms [οὗ εἶδη ὁ ἔμμετρος καὶ ὁ πεζός]? Yes, language is; but are not the rhetorical, the eloquent, and the florid styles also? I answer, that flowery prose [ὁ πεζὸς λόγος, ὃ γε κατεσκευασμένος] is nothing but an imitation of poetry [μίμημα τοῦ ποιητικοῦ]. Ornate poetry [ἡ ποιητικὴ] was the first [πρώτιστα] to make its appearance in our midst [εἰς τὸ μέσον], and was well regarded [εὐδοκίμησεν]. Afterwards [εἶτα] it was closely imitated by writers in the time of Cadmus, Pherecydes, and Hecataeus. The metre [μέτρον] was the only thing dispensed with [λύσαντες], every other poetic grace being carefully preserved. As time advanced [ὑστερον], one after another of its beauties was discarded, till [εἰς τὸ νῦν] at last it came down from its glory into our common prose. In the same way we may say that comedy took its rise from tragedy, but descended from its lofty grandeur into what we now call the common parlance of daily life [τὸ λογοειδὲς νυνί]. And when [we find] the ancient writers making use of the expression 'to sing,' [τὸ ἀεῖδειν] to designate eloquence of style, this in itself is evidence that poetry is the source and origin [πηγὴ καὶ ἀρχή] of all ornamented and rhetorical language [φράσεως κατεσκευασμένης καὶ ῥητορικῆς ὑπῆρξεν ἡ ποιητικὴ]. Poetry in ancient days was on every occasion accompanied by melody. The song or ode [ὠδὴ] was but a modulated speech [λόγος μεμελισμένος], from whence the words *rhapsody*, *tragedy*, *comedy*, are derived; and since originally eloquence was the term made use of for the poetical effusions which were always of the nature of a song, it soon happened [that in speaking of poetry] some said, to sing, others, to be eloquent [τὸ ἀεῖδειν αὐτοῖς τὸ αὐτὸ τῷ φράζειν]; and as the one term was early misapplied to prose compositions, the other also was soon applied in the same way. Lastly, the very term prose [τὸ πεζόν], which is applied to language not clothed in metre [τὸν ἄνευ τοῦ μέτρον λόγον], seems to indicate, as it were, its descent from an elevation or chariot to the ground [τὸν

ἀπὸ ὕψους τινὸς καταβάντα καὶ ὀχήματος εἰς τοῦδαφος]
(*Geography* I, 2, 6; Meineke; tr. Hamilton, Falconer, mod.).

Incidentally, a very similar history of literature, presented in very similar terms, can be found in Plutarch.⁴⁰ Both are generally thought to go back to the Stoic philosopher Posidonius (c. 135-51 BCE). Prose style, or *pezos logos*, would be a mere imitation of poetic diction. Strabo distinguishes with clarity the various steps leading from one to the other. Initially poetry stood alone with prestige. Later the first prose writers imitating the poetic model appeared—they set meter aside but otherwise retained the poetic character. The later prose writers disposed more and more of the poetic means, which led prose as it were down from its heights to contemporary character. This theory of the gradual emergence of prose from poetry certainly deserves to be pondered.⁴¹ It can be read in part as a reply to Gorgias, especially around the generic notion of *logos (genikos)*, although Strabo does not mention him by name. Gorgias would belong to the first prose writers who still preserved the inner stylistic form of poetry, except for the meter. Next, the gradual dissociation from the poetic character, which finally led to the further descent to the ground, where prose became fully prosaic, not to say pedestrian in the modern sense. This account of the history of literature ultimately raises the question of the value of poetry with respect to prose, to the clear advantage of poetry. It depicts poetry as the mother-tongue of humanity, capable of providing pleasure and instruction, and as the source of prose, which will gradually depart from its source, and not for the better. In this account Gorgias's practice would thus appear to stand close to the initial heights.

⁴⁰ Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis*, 406b-d.

⁴¹ Wolfgang Schadewaldt, "Heraufkommen der Prosa," in *Die Anfänge der Geschichtsschreibung bei den Griechen: Herodot-Thukydides*, ed. Ingeborg Schudoma (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), 31, firmly defends the soundness of this account.

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