When Nietzsche assumed his professorship of classical philology at the University of Basel in 1869, his lectures were not only devoted to the literature, philosophy, and history of the Greeks, as we might expect, but also comprised courses on the formal components of classical learning such as grammar, meter, rhythm, and rhetoric. It might be that Nietzsche did not deal with these latter subjects out of a personal interest but because of teaching obligations connected with his appointment. Nevertheless, these lectures did constitute a large part of his teaching activities at the University, which were supplemented by regular teaching at the Paedagogium from 1869 to 1876. This was the high school (Gymnasium) in Basel, which at that time had a strong classical ("humanist") orientation. Nietzsche's task was to prepare the pupils of the upper classes for the university, not necessarily for the study of classical philology alone. Scholars who have dealt with Nietzsche's notes for these courses, testify to their relevance for an understanding of his later writings, yet this part of his work has never generated much interest in traditional Nietzsche scholarship and has also been neglected to a great extent by his editors.

This attitude changed in the seventies, when Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Paul de Man took a new approach to these lectures and, out of a deconstructive interest in Nietzsche's view of language, focused on his courses on rhetoric. Lacoue-Labarthe accorded these lectures a crucial position among Nietzsche's writings and speaks of the landslide effect they exerted on his efforts to construe a unified
philosophical work—an effect of “désœuvrement” (D, 58). From now on, the real Nietzsche, the writer of aphorisms and the absolute sceptic with regard to last principles, begins to emerge. What he had done before, the production of The Birth of Tragedy, for instance, has the character of a mythologizing that can now no longer be justified. Similarly, Paul de Man sees the key to Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics in his early studies of rhetoric. This critique is not merely a reversal of Plato, as Heidegger had claimed, but “lies in the rhetorical model of the trope or, if one prefers to call it that way, in literature as the language most explicitly grounded in rhetoric” (A, 109). Philosophy thereby reveals itself as an “endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature” (A, 115). Or, to phrase this in even more de Manian terms, the self-consumption of philosophy comprised in this infinite reflection upon itself is endlessly postponed: “[T]his self-destruction is infinitely displaced in a series of successive rhetorical reversals which by the endless repetition of the same figure, keep it suspended between truth and the death of this truth” (ibid.). The main difference between these two Nietzsche interpreters is that Lacoue-Labarthe sees the effect of désœuvrement as being brought upon philosophy from the outside, through Nietzsche’s study of rhetoric, whereas de Man considers the working of deconstruction already operative in The Birth of Tragedy itself, but then, of course, enormously intensified by Nietzsche’s theory of tropes. Nietzsche’s occupation with rhetoric and language was of only short duration and meteoric character, but these investigations have put the issues of rhetoric and language firmly onto the agenda of Nietzsche research. Even the arch-conservative Nietzsche-Studien eventually made room for some profound studies of this subject.5

The main hindrance for such investigations is the lack of reliable editions of Nietzsche’s lecture notes, particularly his lectures on classical rhetoric. The Colli-Montinari edition has not yet progressed far enough, and the earlier edition by Otto Crusius is not satisfactory.6 Crusius gives erroneous dates for these lectures and publishes only parts of them, deciding unilaterally that only the first seven paragraphs are worth editing and leaving out paragraphs 8–16 as well as the concluding “Outline of the History of Eloquence.” His annotations are limited to less than one page7 and do not deal with the sources of these lectures, voluminous handbooks on rhetoric and language theory by Richard Volkmann, Gustav Gerber, Leonhard Spengel, and Friedrich Blass.8 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy provide information on all questions related to these lectures in their French translation, but their textual basis is the incomplete Crusius edition.9 This also applies to Carole Blair’s English