What’s Wrong with Lysias’ Speech in the Phaedrus?

In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Lysias and his paradoxically “erotic” speech serve as constant but baffling background to Socrates’ conversation with Phaedrus (227a2-228e5, 230d3-237a5, 241d2-243d1, 257b7-d8, 262c5-264e7, 277d6-278e4). Lysias—Athens’ prized orator—represents for Socrates the charmed but unphilosophical life. Socrates eventually summarizes his charge against Lysias—he is indifferent to knowledge, unable to defend his speeches’ claims, and inaccurate in his judgments about any composition’s value—but whether the charge is true, we must mostly take on his authority.

The *Phaedrus* does, however, provide some putative evidence for Socrates’ judgments: we see Lysias’ effect on Phaedrus, and we hear one of his speeches. Socrates reacts on several occasions to that speech. These reactions would seem to give the most trenchant details about Socrates’ judgment of Lysianic rhetoric. We find, by contrast, that at the most important moments of critical response, Socrates practically glories in ambiguity, opacity, and elusiveness.

The key lack of clarity comes most when Socrates says that he listened only to the “rhetorical” (τῷ... ῥητορικῷ, 235a1) part of the speech, and believes that even Lysias found it (τοῦτο) inadequate. The meaning of this term is highly contentious. Rowe (1986), Yunis (2011), and Ryan (2012) gloss it in radically different ways, none having good evidence to explain whether it means “argument,” or “formal qualities,” or “non-rational aspects.” This confusion is unsurprising, I argue, even if it is rarely addressed head-on. First, the dialogue itself meditates on the polyvalence of “rhetoric.” Second, Socrates’ analysis at the very point is grammatically and pragmatically knotty, bringing “the rhetorical aspect” in juxtaposition with “what one ought to say” (τὸ ὅπερτα, 234e2) and the thought that Lysias is expressing youthful bombast (235a6), and noting that speeches differ only in arrangement, not invention. Socrates later adds to his criticism that the speech lacks order, does not define its terms, takes a wholly negative view of erôs, and fails to be asteios (“urbane”) or demopheles (“publically beneficial”), but none of these explain its “rhetorical” inadequacy.

This paper sets out, with new rigor and precision, the meaning of Socrates’ judgment about Lysias’ speech, focusing on defining the “rhetorical” aspect and linking Socrates’ ambivalent connotation with that of the term in the dialogue as a whole.