

Laurent Pernot (editor):

*Actualité de la Rhétorique*

(Actes et Colloques)

Paris: Klincksieck, 2002

182 pages (bibliography; indices)

ISBN: 2-252-03325-8

Price: €18

In November 1997, the French section of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric held a conference on the topic “20 years of the history of rhetoric in France” (“Vingt ans d’histoire de la rhétorique en France”). The book under review here, *Actualité de la Rhétorique*, (“The topicality of rhetoric”/“Current Trends in Rhetoric”), is a collection of papers originally presented at that conference. As a whole, the collection presents a broad survey of French research in the field of the history of rhetoric from approximately 1970 to 1997. For those who have a specific interest in the field, the essays are no doubt valuable. However, not being a historian myself, the chief value of the book for me lies in the extensive bibliography, which is supported by two good indices (one of authors and texts from antiquity to the present, and one of modern scholars and critics), provided by the editor and, in some cases, by the authors themselves.

The volume is introduced by two short texts by two of the founders of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, professor Marc Fumaroli and professor Alain Michel. In his opening piece (pp. 13-16), Fumaroli makes it quite clear that the study of rhetoric, both systematically and historically, is a necessary antidote to the post-modern excesses of the past twenty years. Michel (pp. 17-23), picking up the thread from a more philosophical point of view, warns against what he considers to be the two major threats against the field of the history of rhetoric, namely “scientific-like positivism and uneducated ‘sociologism’” (“positivisme scientiste et sociologisme sans culture”, p. 20), and concludes that rhetoric and philosophy ought to join forces in their study of human speech (“la parole humaine”, p. 23).

After this general introduction, the six texts that follow address different aspects of the study of the history of rhetoric in France. Under headings like “The first sophistic”, “The second sophistic”, and “Ekphrasis”, Laurent Pernot offers a survey of the research conducted in the domain of classical Greek studies (pp. 27-48). Philippe Heuzé writes about the mutual interdependence of rhetoric and poetics in the field of Latin studies, focusing, it seems to me, more on the object itself than on the actual research (pp. 49-57). The same appears to be true of Philippe Laurens’ discussion of “the impressive re-emergence of the rhetorical continent” (“Réémergence impressionnante du continent rhétorique”, p. 61) during the Renaissance and the Neo-Latin era (pp. 59-69). By contrast, Francis Goyet, who divides his survey of the research on the sixteenth century (pp. 71-87) in two: “The eighties: the text” and “The nineties: the work”, ends his contribution on a hopeful note: “Perhaps, finally, the time has come when rules are no longer considered to be imperative and quasi-totalitarian norms, not even limitations in the manner of Valéry, but means to thrive and create.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Le temps est peut-être venu, enfin, où les règles ne seront plus vues comme des normes impératives et quasi-totalitaires, ni même comme des contraintes à la Valéry, mais comme des moyens de réussir et de créer.” (p. 84)

In his article on the study of classical and modern literature in France (pp. 89-105), Emmanuel Bury picks up and radicalises both Goyet's and Michel's ideas, and concludes, in one of the most interesting passages in the book, that:

Through an irony of history, or of reason, rhetoric itself unites its opponents: Rhetoric shows us that it is the very change of *doxa* – from the classical ideal of a community of minds and mutual recognition to the romantic ideal of the individual and of 'originality' – that has denounced it, but likewise provides us with the means to understand this denunciation. Taken as a whole, rhetoric runs the risk of eluding us as a historical object [...], but only in order to better become the instrument that allows us to understand the history as well as the historicity of our relation to language and literature. It is in this sense, I believe, that rhetoric can become an unparalleled tool for historical investigation: In the same measure as it has, for more than two millennia, governed our relation to the world, to other human beings, and to language, rhetoric undoubtedly remains one of the best means of thinking our relationship to the memory that we are forging for ourselves, i.e., to *literature*.<sup>2</sup>

Given that Bury understands the term literature in a sense wide enough to encompass the general production of symbolic forms, I could not agree more with this passage. To my mind, this is precisely the way that philosophy (and the human sciences in general, for that matter) must proceed: Only by becoming a rhetorical philosophy – *not* a philosophy of rhetoric – will philosophy be able to continue to address and seek to understand the problems of our multi-layered and historically over-determined world. For this reason, I find it surprising that Claude Imbert, writing about rhetorical research in the philosophical domain (pp. 107-121), simply chooses to side-step Bury's perspective, as he side-steps most of the French philosophers that are commonly associated with the revival of rhetoric in the seventies and eighties – including such important thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Instead he focuses upon, and discusses, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, and concludes in a highly platonic way that "this claim to the real, to doubt, and to truth, which characterizes the philosopher's argumentation, is also the price for its legitimacy."<sup>3</sup> From my point of view, Imbert would have done better re-reading his Perelman before making such a statement.

The book concludes with two short texts about the French 'tradition' seen from abroad. The Italian scholar, Maria Silvana Celentano, provides one of the most comprehensive and nuanced views of the "French rhetorical school" to be found in the collection (pp. 125-143). Peter France, writing from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, focuses on the reception of Marc Fumaroli and "his school" ("son école", p. 148) and ends by expressing the hope that the rhetoric of the Scots may be discovered by the French, instead of being left at the mercy of the Americans (pp. 145-153).

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<sup>2</sup> "Par une ruse de l'histoire, ou de la raison, c'est la rhétorique elle-même qui englobe ses contradicteurs; elle nous montre que c'est le glissement de la *doxa* – de l'idéal classique de la communauté des esprits et de la reconnaissance à l'idéal romantique de l'individu et de l'"originalité" – qui l'a condamnée, mais elle nous fournit les moyens de comprendre cette condamnation. Comprise dans son ensemble, la rhétorique risque de nous échapper comme objet historique [...], mais c'est pour mieux devenir l'instrument qui nous permet de comprendre l'histoire et l'historicité de notre rapport au langage et à la littérature. C'est à ce titre que la rhétorique, selon moi, peut constituer un inégalable outil d'investigation historique: dans la mesure où, depuis plus de deux millénaires, elle régit notre rapport au monde, aux autres hommes et au langage, elle demeure assurément l'un des meilleurs moyens de penser notre rapport à la mémoire que nous nous forgerons, c'est-à-dire à la *littérature*." (p. 101)

<sup>3</sup> "Cette injonction de réel, de doute et de vérité, qui singularise l'argument du philosophe, est aussi le prix de sa légitimité." (p. 120)

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All in all, I find *Actualité de la Rhétorique* to be a well-edited and, for historians of rhetoric, no doubt useful book. But since what we learn from the various essays – apart, perhaps, from the last two – appears to be more or less common knowledge within the French domain of rhetorical studies, I think that its international usefulness and impact would have been much greater if it had been written in (or translated into) English.

Mats Rosengren  
Kapellgatan 8  
SE-411 33 Gothenburg  
Sweden  
mats.rosengren@scasss.uu.se

The reviewer is Ph.D. in philosophy and holds the Torgny Segerstedt National post-doctoral fellowship, SCASSS. His current research addresses the contested concepts of construction and creation in contemporary philosophy and social science. His recent translation of *L'Empire Rhétorique* is the first major work by Chaïm Perelman to appear in Swedish: Chaïm Perelman, *Retorikens Imperium*, translated with introduction and commentaries by Mats Rosengren (Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östling Bokförlag AB Symposion, 2004).