

Laurent Pernot:

*Rhetoric in Antiquity*

(English translation by W. E. Higgins. Original title: *La Rhétorique dans l'Antiquité*, Paris: Librairie générale française, 2000)

Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005

xvi + 269 pages (bibliography; indices)

ISBN: 0-8132-1407-6

Price: \$27.95

Laurent Pernot is known world wide among scholars of classical rhetoric, and this English translation of his survey should now make him widely recognized among English-speaking students as well. The book under review, an English translation of the French text originally published in 2000,<sup>1</sup> is a pleasant and informative book that is clear and easy to read. It excels when presenting rhetoric in a social and philosophic context. Rhetoric grows within a community, and Pernot will always help the reader see rhetoric as part of a larger cultural whole.

After a brief programmatic Introduction (pp. ix-xiv), the book contains six chapters: “Rhetoric before ‘Rhetoric’”; “The Sophistic Revolution”; “The Athenian Moment”; “The Hellenistic Globalization”; “The Roman Way and Romanization”; and “The Empire: Innovation in the Tradition”. One nice additional feature of the book is Pernot’s use of “excurses” throughout the text, short digressions on topics of interest to him, such as the status of the canon of the Ten Attic Orators, or Cicero’s use of laughter. These are little treats, with more detail in them than in the regular text, and more specific bibliography as well.

Following the six chapters and the short Conclusion about classical rhetoric during later periods, there is a Thesaurus of basic rhetorical terms and definitions (pp. 215-232); a Chronological Table (pp. 233-235); a Bibliography organized by chapter topics (pp. 237-251); and four Indices (proper names, pp. 253-257; subjects, pp. 258-263; Greek words, pp. 264-266; Latin words, pp. 267-269). The chapters are diachronic, going from Homer to Constantine; the Thesaurus is synchronic, laying out key concepts and categories gathered into a unified system.

Chapter One, “Rhetoric before ‘Rhetoric’” (pp. 1-9), presents rhetoric and oratory before the fifth century BCE in Greece. The title hints at the controversy over the presence of rhetoric before its conceptualization in the fifth century (cf. Cole 1991 and Schiappa 1999, both listed in the bibliography of Chapters 1-3). Pernot treats Homer traditionally – the poet both presents oratory in his poems and also comments on the power of oratory – and carefully talks in terms of speech, not rhetoric, allowing Homer to have a sense of the power of oratory, if not the theory. The chapter is abruptly short. In less than two pages Pernot moves from Homer to the opening of the fifth century. I would have liked more detailed discussion of Hesiod’s comments on the oratorical power of princes, or the new role of lyric poetry and its rhetorical voice in Sappho or Xenophanes, or a clear example of what Solon accomplished in his political poems. Pernot mentions Hesiod and Solon, but does not give us much sense of what they contributed.

---

<sup>1</sup> The original French edition was positively reviewed in *Rhetorical Review* 3:1 (2005), pp. 12-15, by Kyrre Vatsend.

Students of rhetoric may not be as familiar with them as with Homer (much less Sappho or Xenophanes) and so it would be helpful if Pernot had been more thorough here. Still, his attention to the growth of democratic discourse covers an important topic.

Chapter Two, "The Sophistic Revolution" (pp. 10-23), treats the major issues and figures of the fifth century BCE. Pernot discusses Corax and Tisias as if historical (again rejecting the ideas of Schiappa and others about the historicity of Corax and Tisias), and presents the importance and impact of the sophists, Gorgias in particular. He then discusses the implications of the changes of the late fifth century for figures such as Antiphon and Thucydides, but only teases about the dramatists and the important topic of the evolution of prose. As in the first chapter, I would like fuller treatments.

Pernot breaks Chapter Three, "The Athenian Moment" (pp. 24-56), into practice, theory, and criticism (of the fourth century). This chapter exemplifies both Pernot's strengths and weaknesses. He gives a particularly clear presentation of how oratory worked in Athens in the fourth century;<sup>2</sup> the section called "The Republic of the Orators: Reality and Image" (pp. 34-38), gives us a real sense of the democracy in Athens. For the practice of oratory, Pernot uses Isocrates and Demosthenes as his examples, claiming that "[t]he two most important bodies of work, in quantity and quality, are those of Isocrates and Demosthenes" (p. 28). In his treatment, Pernot tends to focus on political oratory and when he looks at judicial oratory, he uses *graphe* speeches, instead of *dike* speeches. He would have been able to correct this inattention to the important genre of *dike* speeches had he added a discussion of Lysias, especially such notable examples as *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, *Against Simon*, *Against Eratosthenes*, or *For the Invalid*. Including Lysias would also have allowed Pernot to foreground the notion of logography and to discuss the metic status of one of the Attic orators.

Pernot then moves from practice to theory. As an Isocratean scholar, I appreciate his treatment of Isocrates and Aristotle here, but it is too brief and simple. Pernot says that schools of the period "differed from one another by level and intention. Someone could learn to speak, as Plato says (*Protagoras* 312B), [...] either to make a career of rhetoric or to improve himself culturally in a disinterested manner" (p. 38). I am not sure if Pernot means for one of the examples to fit each option. The binary opposition does not help, since Isocrates and Aristotle, Pernot's two examples, hover in between the two poles. Isocrates taught culture for leadership in the *polis*; Aristotle created a philosophically oriented treatise opposed to the professional treatises he had seen around him, and Pernot's treatment is actually more sophisticated than his simple introductory sentence. The passage on Aristotle mentions what is distinctive about his work (as Solmsen had set out long ago)<sup>3</sup> but it would be hard for an uninformed reader to pick it up. Moreover, Pernot reduces the three *pisteis* to two, for example, thus undercutting the equality Aristotle gives the three. He mentions Aristotle's preference for deliberative oratory, but does not explain why so much of the treatise still emphasizes judicial aspects. There is none of the tension between what Aristotle wanted to say philosophically and what he felt constrained to say pedagogically. This would have been an opportunity for Pernot to do what he does best, to present the tension in a clear and elegant manner, but he does not show the interesting complexity. Connected to this, his treatment of Aristotle slips because he treats Aristotle *before*

<sup>2</sup> Oddly, both here and in the parallel description of rhetorical practice in Rome, Pernot separates epideictic oratory from "the institutions [...] that encouraged oratory" (p. 24). I am not sure why judicial and deliberative occasions are presented here as part of institutionally supported discourse, but not epideictic, considering the fact that Pernot argues for the importance of the latter genre, especially in the Roman empire.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Solmsen, "The Aristotelian Tradition in Ancient Rhetoric", *AJPh* 62 (1941), pp. 35-50, 169-190.

Plato, and thus he cannot talk in any specific ways about Aristotle responding to Plato's criticisms (though some of the ideas are there without reference to Plato).

Pernot delays treating Plato because he breaks the chapter into practice, theory, and criticism, seeing Aristotle in the second part, and Plato in the third. The treatment of Plato, however, exhibits one of the strengths of the book, Pernot's ability to present complexity with elegance. He compares the *Gorgias* and the *Menexenus*: "[...] the *Menexenus* completes the criticism of the *Gorgias*: after eloquence in the courts and assemblies, the encomium; after the consideration of rhetoric in itself, the examination of a particular genre and the close study of its makeup; after vehemence and seriousness, irony and humor. But the attack of the *Menexenus* is no less grave, for all that; it targets the very patriotism of the Athenians and their celebration of national glories" (p. 49). Pernot sets up Plato's objections found in the *Gorgias* and then discusses how these questions get worked out in the dialogues that follow, at least in a way Plato liked. Given Pernot's skill, it would have been wonderful to see him teach us how Aristotle (and Isocrates) responded to Plato on some of these issues.

In Chapter Four, "The Hellenistic Globalization" (pp. 57-82), Pernot moves us from Greece to Rome by pointing out what the Hellenistic age added to "the Athenian Moment". This useful and clear chapter shows what the Hellenistic period contributes to theory, in style (Theophrastus, virtues and genres, tropes and figures, prose rhythm), in argumentation (Hermagoras, *stasis* theory),<sup>4</sup> and in memory and delivery (with evidence from the Latin tradition). In addition, Pernot discusses the introduction of theories of letter writing and of 'figured speech' (*eskatismenos logos*). He judiciously makes the transition from Greece to Rome by presenting Greek additions, but using later Roman sources for much of the new information.

As usual, we see the interplay of theory and practice, of rhetoric and the philosophic questions about it, this time focusing on Philodemus as an example (and the remarkable embassy from Athens to Rome of 155 BCE). Pernot also calls attention to the importance of philology during this period and the move toward education for cultural influence, though occasions for political oratory still existed. He usefully reminds us, following the work of Louis Robert and Cecil Wooten, of the civic oratory of the period. The section on the orators, however, brings up a question about Pernot's balance of topics, given the audience. He spends a lot of time on orators of the Hellenistic period; scholars should remember this, but since his audience is the initiate, his time and space might have been better spent with more detail in this or other chapters, on Aristotle's reactions to Plato, for example, or Plato's presentation of rhetoric as cookery, or the different kinds of Hellenistic educational centers and their emphases.

Pernot opens Chapter Five, "The Roman Way and Romanization" (pp. 83-127), by setting the scene. He wisely reminds us that we are now in a different world by introducing what he calls the "Roman-ness" of rhetoric in Rome (p. 84). He informs us about cultural assumptions and about the contexts in which oratory appeared. This is very helpful. Topics in this chapter on the Roman Republic include oratory before Cicero (Appius Claudius Caecus, Cato the Elder, the Gracchi brothers, Antonius, and Crassus); the influence of Greek theory (with its translation into Latin vocabulary); and then Cicero himself, both as orator (focusing on the Verrines, the Catilinarians, and the Philippics as examples) and as theorist (focusing particularly on *De Oratore*, but recognizing *Brutus* and *Orator* as important in Cicero's fight against strict Atticism). This is a strong chapter, perhaps the best of the book.

Chapter Six, "The Empire: Innovation in the Tradition" (pp. 128-201), treats the Roman world after Augustus up to Constantine. It is the longest chapter of the book, but Pernot

---

<sup>4</sup> Pernot does not regularly use the term *stasis* theory but prefers "question at issue" (*état de cause* in French). This may be a French tendency; I am more used to the Anglophone and German traditions of using the term *stasis* here, and the translator, W. E. Higgins might have been wise to move to '*stasis*' theory for the English edition.

correctly keeps all parts of this chapter together because he wants to mix discussions of theory and practice, rhetoric and philosophy. He begins with the common and controversial philosophic motif in the first century CE of the decline of oratory and makes two important observations: first that rhetoric experienced “not decline or renaissance, but redeployment” (p. 133), and second that this topic faded after the first century ended and the shock of the new empire began to fade. The section “The Emperor as Orator” (pp. 168-171) works out this notion of the continued but newly deployed use of rhetoric. Thus Pernot nicely blends critical approaches with practice.

With regards to the first half of the chapter (pp. 128-181), which deals with various theoretical issues, some may quibble with the way Pernot subordinates criticism to rhetoric. Nevertheless, this section is also the best part of the chapter, with its thorough, precise, and interesting presentation of the importance of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* for our understanding of classical rhetorical theory. In Quintilian’s treatise we see a good example of a pragmatic Roman bringing together theory and practice, rhetoric and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Quintilian and Pernot are clearly kindred spirits.

Pernot does an admirable job setting out the importance of the oratory of this period, first judicial and deliberative, and then arguing for the increased usefulness of epideictic oratory. His treatment of notable orators includes important people and topics (such as the *Panegyrici Latini*) both in Latin and in the Greek of the Second Sophistic.

In the Conclusion (“The Heritage of Greco-Roman Rhetoric”, pp. 202-213), Pernot very briefly discusses the advent of a new rhetoric in Christianity and its gradual adaptation of classical rhetorical ideas. The book closes with a summary discussion of the arrival of classical rhetoric in the modern world.

The Thesaurus (pp. 215-232) is a useful reference guide. As a synchronic presentation it has the advantage of setting out all the important terms and concepts in an easily referenced form – and the disadvantage of making classical rhetorical theory look like a monolithic edifice. If the reader has paid attention through the chapters, this should not be a problem, but the danger exists nonetheless.

Pernot has added significantly to the Conclusion and the Bibliography to address specifically English audiences, an indication that the book is aimed at (monolingual) students. The translator, W. E. Higgins accurately represents Pernot’s clear, simple French prose. My only concern is that the original title, *La Rhétorique dans l’Antiquité*, might have been more precisely rendered as “Rhetoric in the Classical World”, since current scholarship in English uses the word ancient for a broader focus than just Greece and Rome.

Laurent Pernot does not specify an audience, but seems to be writing for the general reader, someone with little knowledge of classical rhetoric. Thus, the book seems designed for readers in an introductory survey in the history of rhetoric at the undergraduate level, though the lack of specificity might make it inappropriate for graduate courses. A secondary audience would be scholars in related fields (English, modern languages, psychology) who want some familiarity with the topics of classical rhetoric.

The book has two major strengths: first, it is clear, brief, and persuasive. Pernot elegantly presents issues, giving a convincing sense of the unity and sweep of rhetoric in the classical

---

<sup>5</sup> In education on the Greek side, Pernot rightly emphasizes the influence of the Hermogenic corpus and the *progymnasmata*, for which we now have the useful English translations of *Invention* and *Method* by George A. Kennedy (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature/Leiden: Brill, 2005) along with Kennedy’s translations of all the progymnasmatic treatises (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature/Leiden: Brill, 2003). Cecil W. Wooten’s translation of *On Style* is mentioned in the text (p. 164), but not in the chapter’s bibliography (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

---

world. It is easy to see that history and context shape the focuses of rhetoric; Pernot can show how the life of the Athenian or the Roman created the need for oratory and how the practice of oratory created the need to criticize the role of rhetoric. The book's second strength comes from its literary sophistication. Pernot successfully weaves together practice and theory, rhetoric and philosophy, to organize the book. He also sets out issues with a progression that makes the reader see the complexity of an issue, like the ironic criticism of rhetoric in the *Menexenus* complementing the direct criticism in the *Gorgias*. Both of these strengths come from the engaging style and literary sophistication of Pernot himself. He is very good at synthesis and presentation.

Two small weaknesses come from these strengths. First, Pernot's quick and elegant treatment necessarily simplifies some complicated issues. He presents things so smoothly that we do not realize what we have missed, such as the controversy over the historicity of Corax and Tisias in the Greek tradition, or the complicated relationship between rhetoric and literary criticism in Rome. Second, the book lacks footnotes. The reader does not have a clear sense of where to pursue issues that intrigue or confuse. Readers cannot know where the complications are, and if a reader wants to delve further into an issue, there is no specific guidance. Notes pointing to further sources would help in a book as brief as this. For example, on page 37 Pernot notes that Ian Worthington views the effect of the canon of ten orators as destructive, but Pernot does not give us sufficient information, since Worthington has two different bibliographic entries for this chapter and we are not told which to go to, or what section in which book. Thus, even though the text reads fairly easily, it gives the less initiated little help to go any further. These problems aside, however, the book guides the reader well to the major topics and figures of classical rhetoric.

In sum, Laurent Pernot has given us a nice summary of classical rhetoric and its history in a clear, brief presentation. The strength of the study lies in a simple, unified presentation of the tradition that greatly overshadows any minor weaknesses rising from that simplicity. This is an engaging and informative book by a learned and elegant scholar.

Terry L. Papillon  
Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University  
331 Major Williams Hall 0225  
Blacksburg, VA 24061-0225  
USA  
Terry.Papillon@vt.edu

Terry Papillon is Associate Professor of Classics in the Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures at Virginia Tech. His main field of research is Greek rhetoric and oratory. His translation of Isocrates, *Isocrates II*, appeared in the series *The Oratory of Classical Greece* from the University of Texas Press in 2004.