Review of Laurent Pernot, Epideictic Rhetoric
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Preview

The French scholar Laurent Pernot has been at the forefront of the study of ancient rhetoric for over two decades. His standard work *La Rhétorique dans l’Antiquité* has been translated into four languages, including an English edition that I found very useful for the (undergraduate) classroom. Pernot has now written a succinct and insightful book on epideictic rhetoric, focusing in particular on ancient praise. Remarkably, the author has chosen to publish this work in English right away, meaning that readers without French do not have to wait for a translation. Before offering an overview of the chapters and some observations on Pernot’s argument, I want to emphatically recommend this book to anyone — scholars and students — with an interest in Roman (cultural) history. Pernot firmly establishes epideictic’s centrality to life in the cities of the Roman Empire.

In a brief preface (vii-x) the author announces the two guiding topics of the book, namely the history and function of epideictic, and gives a helpful outline of the four chapters to follow. The book closes with a one-page epilogue.

In the first chapter (1-28), “The unstoppable rise of rhetoric,” Pernot deals primarily with the history of epideictic, looking at the development of the phenomenon itself and of the terminology used to describe it. He traces the first beginnings of the genre of epideictic back to the funeral orations of classical Athens and Gorgias’s encomia. Isocrates was the first to write a eulogy on an individual object with his *Evagoras* and Xenophon followed suit with his *Agesilaus*. For the Hellenistic period there is little textual evidence, while in the imperial period epideictic “which started as rhetoric’s poor relation, became (…) its most esteemed and prominent” (10). Pernot attributes this reversal of fortunes
to the establishment of the Principate: addresses to imperial representatives and local worthies were in high demand in the increasingly aristocratic cities, while peace and stability allowed for the regular celebration of festivals and competitions. The theoretical development of the epideictic genus started with Isocrates’s tripartite division of rhetoric into accusation, praise, and advice. Aristotle developed this system further and first used the term epideictic to refer to praise. The reception of his account among Roman theorists like Cicero and Quintilian shows a remarkable change: the former is very reluctant towards praise as a rhetorical genre, while the latter insists on encomium’s place in Roman custom. This is another illustration of the quick rise of epideictic within rhetorical practice.

The second and third chapters of the book are the most innovative and rewarding. Both address the relation between the form of encomium and the culture in which it was created. Chapter two (29-65), “The grammar of praise,” treats the ancient theories on the structure and style of encomia, focusing on the writings attributed to Menander Rhetor in particular. The so-called system of topoi is “a general method that allows” the orator “to find useful ideas for every situation,” which are “not ready-made developments, or clichés, but rubrics and vantage points in the light of which the orator examines his subject” (29-30). The significance of these topoi extends beyond the practice of oratory: they mirror ancient (philosophical) ideas about human nature, when, for instance, virtues and actions are given priority in the system over exterior and physical goods.

The system devised to praise persons was extended with only minor modifications to cities, gods, and even animals or inanimate objects, underscoring how in antiquity “the landscape (…) takes on moral qualities” (45). The remainder of the chapter contains an insightful analysis of hyperbole, which is “legitimately applied to an object whose grandeur would not be sufficiently expressed in accurate words” (60), though it must not be exaggerated! The author plausibly defends the extreme brevity of his discussion of blame (63-65) by pointing to the underdeveloped rhetorical theory of this subgenre.

In chapter three (66-100), “Why epideictic rhetoric?” Pernot turns to the second topic announced in his preface, the function of encomium. He approaches this question first by illustrating the importance of encomium within society: orators performed in front of (often) large audiences, rarely without an official invitation or mandate. Their participation was required to mark many different types of events or occasions, based both on their status and their services. The author furthermore makes a strong case for understanding praise as an argument, namely that of the amplification of its object. Using several types of proofs (comparison to other greats, argument for uniqueness etc.) the orator aims at persuading his audience of the glory of the city or individual being praised. Epideictic, argues Pernot, is actually much closer to the deliberative genus than typically assumed: the orator giving praise advises the community to uphold and celebrate its values. In order to do so “every encomium has a double message. Even as it affirms the
merits of the subject praised, it proclaims, implicitly or not, the model of
excellence (...) against which the subject is measured” (98).

The final chapter (101-120), “New approaches in epideictic,” is significantly
shorter than the others and different in character. Rather than offering a sustained
argument, the author, as he himself admits, merely introduces some possible
avenues of research for future studies of epideictic. The most developed and
promising ‘avenues’ concern the possibility of implicit, subversive messages in
encomium and the experiences of the audience (boredom, envy etc.). Even if the
remarks in this chapter are somewhat elusive, the author is to be commended for
concluding his book in such a candid and unorthodox way and for opening up the
scholarly debate.

Susan Jarratt presents the book on its dust jacket as “an introduction for
newcomers and a critical intervention of interest to specialists.” The fact that
Pernot truly lives up to this acclaim is no easy feat. It is likely that in wanting to
appeal to a broad audience the author has decided to annotate his text only lightly.
As a result, however, Pernot does not do full justice to the existing scholarship on
imperial rhetoric, and when situating his own argument he presents an unfairly
bleak picture of the field. He describes, for instance, as “still current” the opinion
that “orationes are nothing but pretty words, devoid of any practical purpose” (69).
And, in the sentence “postclassical and late antiquity has (or had) a reputation as
an age of decline and fall” (28) it would have been more accurate to just write
“had”. Secondly, in his eagerness to convince his readership of the significance of
encomium there are times when Pernot slightly overstates his case, such as his
claim that professional orators did not write encomia of mythological figures or
perform in front of their friends to demonstrate their skill. Even if performances
of praise were usually commissioned and typically dealt with important
contemporaries, this does not exclude the possibility of more casual, frivolous
events: compare the musician who, after a high profile performance in a
prominent venue, will go to a dingy club to play in front of his colleagues and
friends.

These remarks notwithstanding, Pernot has accomplished much in a short and
very readable book. He uses a wide variety of sources, deftly combining literary
and epigraphic evidence, and succeeds in making an underappreciated author
such as Menander Rhetor accessible and attractive for a wide audience. The book
is carefully produced and comes with a good index, although an index locorum is
lacking. I urge everyone with an interest in the culture of the Roman Empire to
read this book for its highly intelligent and stimulating treatment of an important
phenomenon. Pernot’s eloquent advocacy of epideictic is bound to inspire many:
“By choosing and ordering themes, by establishing the grammar of the
encomium, rhetors voiced and wrote down prevailing conceptions sincerely held
and widely shared. Epideictic rhetoric thus wrote a not-negligible chapter in the
intellectual and cultural history of the ancient world” (49).
Notes:

1. Reviewed by Thomas Schmitz in BMCR in 2002.08.11, English translation reviewed by Stefanie A.H. Kennell in BMCR in 2006.03.07.

2. In his acknowledgements (xi-xii) the author explains that the book stems from a series of lectures delivered in English at the 2012 meeting of the Rhetoric Society of America.


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