

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Chaim Perelman

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Alan G. Gross and Ray D. Dearin, Chaim Perelman, Albany: SUNY Press, 2003. 166 pages.

Arthur E. Walzer and Edward Schiappa, editors of the SUNY Press series *Rhetoric in the Modern Era*, identify their series' target audience as nonspecialists—"graduate students coming to the study of a theorist for the first time and professors broadly interested in the rhetorical tradition" (p. ii). The second book in this series, Alan G. Gross and Ray D. Dearin's *Chaim Perelman*, effectively reaches such an audience and serves as an excellent primer on both Perelman and the field itself. All of the major figures in the history of rhetoric are woven into the narrative, from Plato to Kenneth Burke. Yet, while Gross and Dearin usefully situate Perelman's work for the newcomer by inserting it within the larger rhetorical context, their study of Perelman's own theory is more substantial than a basic introduction. Their distillation of Perelmanian rhetoric is as much generative as it is synthetic, and should be equally appealing to a specialist audience. To scholars of rhetoric and composition, in particular, this book deftly blends theory with practice, echoing Perelman's own rhetorical programme by matching argumentative techniques with their philosophical underpinnings.

Gross and Dearin rightly point out that Perelman is "one of Aristotle's most important heirs," noting that he "develop[ed] the Master's ideas in ways that match in fruitfulness the work of Kenneth Burke, one of the most important maverick Aristotelians" (p. ix). Like Burke, Perelman was a prolific theorist, and like Burke's, Perelman's texts are often "difficult to read" and "puzzling," as Gross and Dearin describe them (p. ix). However, while Burke's expansive rhetorical theory may best be characterised as systematically unsystematic—he is neither hierarchical nor prescriptive—Perelman's theory is sometimes systematic to a fault. His landmark work, *The New Rhetoric* (co-authored with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca), is over 560 pages; its structure, as Gross and Dearin observe, "tends to obscure [his] most interesting ideas in a mass of detail" (p. xi).

To present these “obscured” ideas together as unified concepts, Gross and Dearin comb through the text, and through Perelman’s other works, to assemble what they call “the Perelmanian rhetorical arch” (p. xii). They isolate these concepts into separate chapters, highlighting some of Perelman’s most important contributions to rhetorical theory—the concept of presence, the role of arrangement and figures, the construction and function of audience. Gross and Dearin’s approach is inviting because it sketches out a more immediately recognisable structure for Perelman’s rhetoric than that which emerges in *The New Rhetoric*, enabling the reader to understand at a glance how the different pieces of his theory fit together.

The first two chapters step back from Perelmanian rhetoric and begin with its biographical and philosophical foundations. Chapter One reflects succinctly on Perelman’s life, both professionally and personally, usefully contextualising both within the larger social, political, and intellectual climate of his time. Importantly, in this chapter, Gross and Dearin also puzzle out Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s role as a co-author of *The New Rhetoric*, offering a helpful synopsis of her life and of her relationship with Perelman as both a colleague and friend.

Chapter Two examines Perelman’s intense concern for devising a philosophical rhetoric. Gross and Dearin argue that Perelman’s “writings stress the interrelationships between rhetoric and philosophy at every turn, and anyone who essays to understand his rhetorical views must first examine the metaphysical axioms upon which they are based” (p. 14). Their decision to begin with Perelman’s philosophy before moving on to his rhetoric pays off in several ways. The authors are able to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of his theory, showing how it fits within the other intellectual currents of his time. Relatedly, this chapter makes the case that Perelman stands out among recent rhetorical theorists because his theory “embraces a coherent world view in which rhetoric plays an essential part” (p. 14). More significantly, though, the chapter inserts Perelmanian thinking—and rhetorical thought generally—within topics of current academic interest. Invoking major players in science studies (Kuhn and Polanyi, among them), Gross and Dearin show how Perelmanian thought contributed to the possibility of a rhetoric of science (and, here, Gross’ voice as an important rhetorician of science serves him well). Similarly, the authors show how Perelman’s standing as a Doctor of Law equally informs his theory, which is guided by an overarching concern for equity in argumentation.

The balance of Gross and Dearin’s book treats Perelmanian rhetoric directly, moving systematically through its theoretical “arch.” The authors begin with the most essential aspect of Perelman’s rhetoric (and indeed of any rhetoric), the audience. They then move, over the space of several chapters, to study what Perelman calls “the isolated arguments” (*The New Rhetoric*, p. 187), which together make up the stuff of

any argument. The following three chapters take up separately rhetoric's relationship with truth, arrangement, and the figures; and the final chapter takes up Perelman's notion of presence, which Gross and Dearin rightly assert is "a fitting conclusion [to the book] since presence in its most interesting form is not the isolated effect of the elements of arrangement, style, and invention, but the cumulative effect of interactions among these" (p. 135).

Gross and Dearin bridge theory with practice, balancing Perelman's philosophical rhetoric with its real-world uses. They apply Perelmanian concepts to arguments in public address, philosophy, and science, offering novice readers concrete examples of how the theory can be applied. In their chapter on the role of the figures in argumentation, for example, Gross and Dearin produce, in essence, a theoretically substantial glossary of terms that could be useful for both criticism and composition.

Gross and Dearin's text distills Perelman's most important insights into a more accessible volume than *The New Rhetoric*, but its relation to Perelman's later work, *The Realm of Rhetoric*, is harder to define. As, essentially, a condensed and updated version of *The New Rhetoric* with fewer examples, *Realm* works well as a textbook and has the added advantage of being in Perelman's own words. However, what Gross and Dearin's text loses in immediacy, it gains in perspective; the authors always keep their eyes trained on the bigger picture of how Perelman fits into the historical context of a 2500-year-old tradition. And while the authors quote Perelman generously and faithfully summarise his ideas, they also extend and refocus parts of his theory, highlighting the ways in which they feel it works best. As a result of this dual focus—on summary and criticism—*Chaim Perelman* promises to be a useful classroom text for both rhetoric and composition courses, as, for example, a contemporary companion to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, or as a core textbook accompanied by related readings.

Gross and Dearin's book has many strengths and relatively few weaknesses. The most notable drawback is that, while most of the chapters strike a balance between efficiency and inclusiveness, several could be further expanded. For instance, their chapter on audience (Chapter 3) seems slight relative to the rest of the book—and especially so considering the centrality of audience to Perelman's theory. While Gross and Dearin do clarify the confusion that has long surrounded the categories of universal and particular audiences, they fall short of demonstrating the ways in which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca "have a complete theory, a coherent idea of what a rhetorical audience is" (p. 31). They offer as examples extensive excerpts of political speeches throughout the chapter (as in the rest of the book) but these excerpts could do with more detailed explication and analysis to show, explicitly, how they illustrate their discussion.

The final chapter, on presence, faces a similar problem of emphasis; while it handles its subject-matter successfully, it is left to perform double-duty as the concluding chapter of the book—and in this capacity, it's not quite satisfying. A separate conclusion could have offered the authors more space to reflect on their role in preparing the material, to give suggestions for readers new to Perelman or to rhetoric, or to indicate how Perelman's work has been taken up by critics over the last half-century. None of these shortcomings are fatal to the text, however, which is nevertheless an engaging, comprehensive introduction to Perelmanian rhetoric—one that would serve equally well as a classroom textbook and as a reference for more advanced scholars.