



The Genuine Teachers of This Art: Rhetorical Education in Antiquity, Jeffrey Walker

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REVIEW ESSAYS

Jeffrey Walker. *The Genuine Teachers of This Art: Rhetorical Education in Antiquity.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. 352 pages. \$49.95 hardcover.

In his landmark 1941 paper “The Aristotelian Tradition in Ancient Rhetoric,” Friedrich Solmsen repeats a story told by both Cicero and Quintilian about how, after the first generation of Greek rhetoricians developed the art, its study and teaching split into two streams: one represented by Aristotle, the other by Isocrates. All later development of the field was marked by those “two outstanding theorists.”

Having introduced this two-stream account, Solmsen then explores only one, arguing that the Aristotelian tradition is nearer to his line of work and that its materials lie closer to hand. He is careful not to suggest that once that approach is brought to light, “the Isocratean may be found by a process of subtraction”; but he does claim that when the “first half of the job of analysis has been done,” the other element will be more obvious. Solmsen, of course, never got around to that other element, though he lived fifty more years. One suspects that he never intended to give Isocrates the same treatment he gave Aristotle.

The neglect is par for the course in modern rhetorical studies. In texts that were influential in the late twentieth-century revival of classical rhetoric among US compositionists, George Kennedy portrayed the Isocratean tradition as little more than a “continuation of sophistry,” claiming that its main method of instruction was imitation and its interest in theory, slight. According to Kennedy, Isocrates (unlike Aristotle) emphasized written discourse over spoken, epideictic over deliberative and judicial, style over argument, and amplification over forcefulness—all hallmarks of “secondary rhetoric,” the form the art takes when it is practiced chiefly in classrooms rather than the public sphere. In Kennedy’s classification only the Platonic and Aristotelian systems are deemed “philosophical,” despite the fact that *philosophia* is precisely what Isocrates claimed to profess his whole career.

Adding irony to insult, for much of European history, it was the Isocratean stream of rhetoric, not the Aristotelian, that most nourished higher education. In a famous chapter of his study *Paideia*, Werner Jaeger said of Isocrates that

“since the Renaissance, he has exercised a far greater influence on the educational methods of humanism than any other Greek or Roman teacher.” Henri Marrou extended the influence backwards: “On the whole it was Isocrates, not Plato, who educated fourth-century Greece and subsequently the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.”

Isocrates’ prominent role in educational history may come as a surprise to some students of classical rhetoric in US departments of English and Communication, where curricula in the subject have been dominated for more than half a century by Plato and Aristotle. If those two have faced any foil or needed any supplement, it has been provided by the sophists. But even there, Isocrates has been overshadowed.

Fortunately, over the last decade or so, the famous writer and teacher has experienced a modest renaissance. Among rhetoricians, Ekaterina Haskins and Takis Poulakos have both published monographs on him. And among classicists, “Interest in Isocrates has been growing rapidly,” according to the editors of a recent two-volume collection of his work published by the University of Texas Press.

Perhaps the most impressive contribution yet now comes from Jeffrey Walker. Unlike previous studies, this one is less about Isocrates himself than about the *approach* to higher education that he can be said to have consolidated, inaugurated, or inspired. To fully depict that approach, Walker moves across a wide swath of time and space, reconstructing an Isocratean *technê* from fourth-century BCE Athens, extrapolating that system forward into later antiquity, and, using texts from Hellenistic and Roman writers, casting a light backwards onto the beginnings of the system. Coming at his object from both directions this way, Walker provides an enormously rich portrayal of the chief non-Aristotelian stream of classical rhetorical theory and pedagogy to survive the decline of Athens. In a way, seventy years after the first installment was published, the other half of Solmsen’s project has finally been written.

Walker’s book is not, however, for the fainthearted. Organized into four extended, more or less self-contained essays (one spread across two chapters), the study provides neither a neat chronological history of the educational system it portrays, nor a systematic explication of its parts, nor a thesis about its attractions and flaws relative to some other system. Instead, Walker gives us close readings of a variety of ancient rhetorical texts and treatises, putting many in close conversation with one another for the first time and gradually building up the outlines of a powerful educational project. In a sense, this indirect approach mirrors Isocratean education itself, the pupil learning by guided immersion, successively building up capacity through increasingly complex exercises and problems, occasionally

surfacing to reflect on methods and goals. The process is not easy or quick, but the payoff is worth the time and effort.

The first essay in the book is a rereading of Cicero's *De Oratore* centered on the character Antonius, who embodies for Walker a middle ground in rhetorical pedagogy between the narrowly technical training advocated by Scaevola and the broad, philosophical education represented by Crassus. Walker's key move is to see in Antonius's practicality an appreciation for *philosophia*, evident in the attention he gives to *theses*, or general questions, in the training of orators. Among the Romans, rhetorical education proper began with *hypotheses*, questions pertaining to particular cases. Treatment of *theses*, the more literary, philosophical exercise included in the *progymnasmata*, was outside the scope of rhetoric. But, for Antonius, the exercise lent to civic life a facility in political-moral theory that was useful in public affairs. The approach is quintessentially Isocratean in its vision of a practical effectivity that derives from *both* experience *and* study, but also in its method: the literary, moral, and political immersion of schoolroom exercises. Antonius thus stands against both the technical "hacks" who divorce oratorical training from wide literary and philosophical learning and the "philosophers" who separate theory from practice. In the dialogue, argues Walker, Cicero ultimately ends up embracing "the 'ancient' sophistic tradition that culminates in Isocrates and that, with Isocrates as the 'father of eloquence' and the 'teacher of all rhetoricians,' descends from him down through the Hellenistic era" (55).

The next essay moves backward in time to reconstruct that tradition. In an extended, two-part "probabilistic conjecture" about Isocrates' pedagogical program, Walker offers a scholarly tour de force that answers two key questions: Did Isocrates write a *technê* of rhetoric? And, if so, what did it contain? To answer the latter, his sources include Isocrates' own forensic, deliberative, and epideictic "speeches," the contemporary treatise *Rhetoric to Alexander* (probably based on Isocrates' program), and a handbook of *progymnasmata* from the first-century CE writer Theon. The curriculum has two parts: First, there is a long sequence of preliminary exercises through which the student is habituated in the *philosophia* needed for civic effectiveness. Walker speculates that this included maxim/chreia, fable, narrative, refutation, confirmation, description, comparison, ethopoeia, commonplace, *thesis*, encomium, and law, each subdivided into headings or *ideai* (for example, restatement, counterstatement, lengthening and shortening), which the student worked through one by one. The exercises accomplished several things at once: They built up the student's "political-philosophical commonplace collection, they would cultivate his familiarity and fluency with the literate dialect . . . , and they developed basic habits of enthymematic and antilogic invention" (104).

The second part of the curriculum worked the student through advanced composition and declamation exercises—imaginary cases argued on both sides. The *technê* would have included an early version of stasis theory for discovering the key conflict or question at issue; an invention system organized by the parts of an oration (introduction, narration, proof, and so forth); and a language of style used to talk about diction, rhythm, and so forth. “In sum,” writes Walker,

[Isocrates] seems to have developed a *paideia* that first cultivated the student’s familiarity and skill with a progressively larger and more complex set of *ideai* in *progymnasmata*, including the foundations for moral-political philosophia, and then practiced the student in creatively recombining those elements according to the demands of particular, practical situations, or facsimiles thereof, in declamations. (154)

Some of this is relatively new to our understanding of rhetorical pedagogy, especially the early role Walker gives Isocrates in the development of stasis theory.

The third essay flashes forward to the Second Sophistic, when Greek rhetoricians of the Roman empire worked their students through intricate declamation problems. Using texts by Hermogenes, Aelius Aristides, Libanius, and others, Walker makes two important contributions to our understanding of this project. First, he argues persuasively for merging the handbook and sophistic traditions in the history of rhetoric. The distinction between these two comes from a misreading of the handbooks, interpreted as stand-alone, primary texts from which a student learns a science or art. Walker reads the rhetorical *technai* differently, seeing them as reference works used by students who had already acquired rhetorical capacity through more implicit means (reading, imitation, exercise). From this point of view, the sophistic and technical traditions of rhetoric were one and the same, and both descended from Isocrates. The second contribution of the essay is its reinterpretation of the declamation exercises of late antiquity, which can seem to modern readers like fanciful schoolroom exercises of no practical or political import. From Walker’s point of view, the importance of stasis theory among these teachers reveals their yearning for democratic fora “in which disputes are settled through the free exchange of reasoned arguments before unprejudiced judges” (185); the problems they posed to students thus helped keep alive a civic imaginary of democracy, even when such a thing was unavailable in daily life.

The final essay of the book is a survey of the work of first-century BCE Greek rhetorician Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Here, Walker reiterates the non-Aristotelian conception of rhetorical education he has been building, one open to a broader set of civic genres than just law cases and assembly debates, and

requiring a training more inventive and practical than dialectical judgment. The centerpiece of the essay is Walker's rereading of Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities*, seen here as a *rhetorical* history of the Roman Republic, highlighting the conflicts early Romans negotiated through deliberation and, often, concession. In this sense, the text is not just "a credible and significant work of history of its time but also a significant work of rhetorical and practical political philosophy for its intended audience(s) of students and practitioners of rhetoric in civic affairs in the Augustan Age" (279).

What then was the Isocratean tradition in the history of rhetoric? It was a tradition oriented to the formation not of speeches, or of correct opinion, but of *rheto*rs, individuals whose civic capacity was more practical than dialectical skill, more noble than sophistic flair. Tools like handbooks were useful in that process but only *after* the student had acquired skill. The program was tied rather to immersion in a literary canon: to reading aloud, critical discussion, imitation and variation exercises, and teacher commentary. For advanced students it also included practice in deliberation, especially arguing both sides of questions. And it required years of study, "a thorough, rigorous training measured in Olympiads," with benefits for both speakers and the civil communities they served (165).

Walker omits two characteristics of this system that may help explain why it has not been popular among modern educators and theorists: The program was inseparable from a thematic component that can only be described as nationalistic. And it evinced a fondness for linguistic drill that too often descended into small-mindedness on the part of teachers and students alike. This paradox of Isocratean pedagogy—its eloquence and nobility, on the one hand, its tendency to conservatism and artificiality, on the other—is the great problem with rhetoric itself: a verbal art powerfully attuned to situation but too often imprisoned by it as well.

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Garry Wills. *Rome and Rhetoric: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011. 200 pages. \$25.00 hardcover.

As a work of analysis, *Rome and Rhetoric: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar* falters in many interpretive and evaluative ways. Although Garry Wills's respect for