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Jasper Neel. *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric Theory and Writing in America.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-1933-6.

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Jasper Neel approaches the "scholarly site named Aristotle" and the "scholarly conversation named rhetoric" unassumingly in his prologue to Aristotle's Voice. He claims that this "manual for professional life" will examine composition pedagogy in an at tempt to answer two brief, yet critical questions: first, what has shaped his pedagogy; and second, what shaped whatever has shaped his pedagogy? And while he stresses that his book is nothing but a "crude manual" to aid composition teachers in pedagogical evaluation, readers quickly realize that it will be far more than that, our primary clues consisting of his apparent disassociation from "rhetoric" and "rhetoricians," his warnings about the future of rhetoric and composition, and most importantly, his emphasis on contextualization and his identification with Sophistry which led him to author this book.

At the conclusion of his five chapters, Neel has, in many respects, succeeded in his examination. His insights into the development of the modern field of rhetoric and composition, and into the forces which guided this development, are for the most part keen and powerful. As readers, Neel helps us personalize and humanize some of the forces which shaped his (and therefore our own) pedagogies. But this journey towards what he calls human discourse is not a pleasant one. The questions he asks, and leave s his readers asking, about the future and the foundation of rhetoric and composition may be as troubling as any that we'll find in scholarship today.

Yet no matter how a reader reacts to Neel's arguments and recommendations, he raises poignant issues in regards to the politics of the classroom and the academy. His unique writing style (a term I use with some hesitation) falls somewhere between his self -defined modes of human and professional discourse, offering readers a not-so-subtle example of the conflicts we endure. And even if a reader remains unconvinced by Neel's arguments, *Aristotle's Voice* provides a valuable mirror against which to judge the freshman composition course in general, our individual pedagogies in particular, and the universe of rhetorical composition.

It takes Neel little time to attack this universe as in Chapter One, "The Rhetoric and Politics of Slavery," he examines the role of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a political document and its implications as such in higher education today. It is immediately evident, with his comparisons of Aristotle to the Old South institutions of racism and slavery, that he had diminished the danger of his objectives in the prologue.

Set against the not-so-distant (yet barely remembered) civil rights battles of the fifties and sixties, as well as the waning mania of political correctness, Neel is able to shock readers and illustrate the danger of intolerability lurking beneath the mostly placid surface of our nation. He removes us from our relatively safe homes in the world of institutional rhetoric and plunges us into a politicized view of the world, much as his own experiences in Mississippi politicized his life in 1967. It is at that moment that we see his book, however strident his claims that it is not a book about rhetoric or Aristotle, is clearly focused on both, specifically the impact of Aristotelian thought on our pedagogy and social structures today. Ultimately, as rhetoricians and descendants of the Aristotelian thought process, Neel draws us into questioning our own profession and pedagogies. "Like Little John, we can ask, Are we good guys or bad guys?"' (p. 15). The answer is none too clear, even for Neel himself, as w e see his own writing vacillate between the personal of human discourse and the professional of academic life in virtually every paragraph.

Explicitly, however, Neel ties the answer directly to the amount of power and credence we give Aristotle in our own classrooms. "Much too often composition classes … take on nightmarishly Aristotelian features. Because the teachers are so completely unprepared for what they find in the classroom, they retreat immediately into an imagined position of linguistic, aesthetic, and hence moral superiority" (p. 27). That's why it is

then so difficult to disagree with Neel's conclusion that separating Aristotle's Rhetoric from his Politics is as difficult, and as impossible, as separating our own pedagogies from Aristotle's politics. As a result, Neel quickly makes what may be his most salient point: that the teaching of writing can never be unsituated or dehumanized to transcend a situation.

Following his "politicization" of Aristotle, Neel examines the Rhetoric and assigns it blame for the present problematized position of the Rhet/Comp professor, a position with which he is not only comfortable, but in fact he prefers. "My own attraction t o composition studies has to do with its shade tree mechanic image, its second class status, its troubled and perilous entry into the world of intellectual respectability" (p. 37). It is at this point, when Neel sketches his peculiar regard for the role of outcast, that we begin to grasp the implications of his emphasis on contextualization and the true breadth and depth of his indictment of the academy and the practice of professional discourse. Not coincidentally, it is also at this point that his readers might begin to feel truly uneasy on a personal and professional level with Neel's arguments.

The difficulty with Neel's position is that he too closely identifies the professionalization of "rhetoric and composition" with the Aristotelian foundation on which most writing instruction has historically been based. Ultimately, if we accept the impli cations of his arguments we must also accept two conclusions. First, that rhetoric and composition are at best a provincial dedication which rely on a single instructor's collected experiences to guide students toward rhetorical introspection, thus leaving no room for theoretical practice as most of us know it and practice it today. Second, that the present state of rhetoric and composition instruction is the best that we can hope for and that we can only continue to survive as functioning educators by occupying the lowest rung of the university ladder. Given his arguments then, we are left with little to support our career choice, our pedagogies, even the foundation of our educational philosophy … a situation with which even the most liberal, reactionary members of his audience might feel uneasy and unwilling to accept.

And if chapter two is disheartening, chapter three is crushing. Neel studies in more detail the problematic role of professional discourse, as well as the natural human discourse which might offers readers and writers (and rhetoricians) a way out of our troubles. Unfortunately, after an extended (and sometimes difficult) discussion of Aristotle's Rhetoric and an examination of both its professional and human voices, Neel again offers no solution, hope, or even higher ground for which we can strive. He finds no safety in professional discourse alone, no safety in human discourse alone, and only values his position as a Sophist because it allows him to realize the best of both worlds, stand on both sides of the fence.

Lamenting his own failure as a post-graduate professor, Neel recounts how one of his best students failed to obtain a job because of Neel's preference for creating a human discourse in the freshman composition classroom. "I should have trained him to be a sophist (clearly I myself am a sophist). As a sophist, he would have known how to make himself acceptable to any sort of audience, no matter how hidebound or ridiculous" (p. 126). Yet even as a sophist, he sees no salvation and fears being corrupted, as was Lysias, by simply existing in a world which supports professional discourse. "Given his intelligence, his politics, and his situation, surely Lysias should have been able to hear the sophists' arguments against slavery … Chances are good that he made those arguments himself. But if he did, he made them in professional discourse. Then he went home to a house supported by slave labor and a dinner cooked by a slave cook" (p. 127).

So, after separating his true intentions from his professional discourse, Neel examines the function, or rather "dysfunction," of Aristotle's Rhetoric and why it has given rise to such a difficult, and in his view unrealistic, tradition of professional discourse. Unfortunately, his literature review reads just as any professional would expect it to given the ubiquity of the author and text, and the number of critics who have analyzed it. Given any one of a number of texts in any one of a number of fields, a scholar could find the discrepancies, contradictions, infighting and sense of competition which Neel does. But as a rhetorician, does this indicate an inherent flaw or prejudice in the text? Maybe.

What Neel fails to examine is the possibility that rhetoricians (whatever they may call themselves) can actually rise above the tradition of fighting over "a conflicting set of methodologies about which professionals never cease arguing" (p. 181). Can we, through a continued advocacy of what he calls human discourse but which goes by many other names, ever arrive at a professionalization which is not distracted and distanced from our true task? To Neel, the answer would appear to be no. In his opinion, we must not only distance ourselves from our past, but step entirely outside of our professional discourse to the excluded arena of sophistry and human discourse to carry on a useful and valuable discussion. (I

am uneasy with his principles of inclusion an d exclusion when it comes to "acceptable" texts. What makes his sophist texts or those of his other sophist scholars non-Aristotelian and unprofessional? While he never delves deeply enough into this question, Neel makes an adequate case that in at least some sense, Aristotle has himself predetermined that sophistry is not rhetoric).

Neel's bleak forecast for rhetoric and composition and pessimistic approach to the growth and professionalization of our discourse and field made me uneasy as an aspiring professional, but ultimately, his contradictions and discrepancies create a valuable , troubling work. His conscious avoidance of, even disdain for arriving at an answer is the only conclusion we can possibly expect after the previous 200 pages in which he emphasizes the contextualization, the humanity, the unprofessionalization of writing instruction as the only method to achieve true, unprejudiced writing instruction, while simultaneously revealing his own predilection towards professionalism. "I can recommend sophistry. It will not produce knowledge, it will not finish anything off, 'it will not create a foundation or add to an edifice" (p. 198). Its only value, at least the best that Neel can hope for, is that it will keep us as educators unstable, uncomfortable and firmly in the world of human –not professional–discourse.

What, then, will Neel make of this review if and when he reads it? Clearly, it falls in the realm of professional discourse and is even aimed at professionalizing not only his text, but me as the author as well. This is the difficulty in adjusting to Neel's new paradigm of rhetoric. For while I agree (and I suspect many others do as well) with his observations and conclusions about the troubled history with which rhetoric and composition professors must contend, I cannot relegate our profession to the back of the academic bus simply because we have not yet developed a fully realizable framework for our area of study. Rather, I think that we need to prepare ourselves and our work for professionalization in our own ways. Is this simply blind optimism? Is there more at work here than Neel has been able to perceive? Or is Neel simply playing devil's advocate for the sake of shock value?

Is Neel a rhetorician? Yes. Is he a professional? Yes. Is his work Aristotle's Voice a part of our professional discourse? Certainly. So why then does he insist on distancing this book from anyone who calls himself a rhetorician? Presumably, there are three possibilities. First, it's possible that he is, as he claims, a true "sixties lefty" who stands on the side of the anti-establishment cause, which in this case is anti-scholastic. Second, it may be that he truly believes his claims and has not yet come to terms with how he can continue functioning in his role as a rhetorician while embracing a more humanistic discourse which he believes is the "right" way to educate. Or third, it is possible that he has deliberately overstated his case in an attempt to break open the subject of Aristotle's Rhetoric for further discussion.

Given Neel's credits and career, I can guess that the third option is the most probable. His complicity in the development of our academic professionalization, despite his stated unease with being labeled a rhetorician, thoroughly places him in the role of a traditional scholar. So it is then up to us, to take what we can from Neel's apparently contradictory arguments and continue our own professionalization, both as individuals and as educators, with a more enlightened and knowledgeable grasp of our foundations.

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