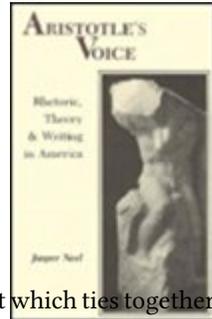


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Jasper Neel. *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric Theory and Writing in America*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-1933-6.

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Jasper Neel's *Aristotle's Voice*, while at times almost deliberately deceptive and elusive, provides a penetrating study of Aristotle, particularly the Rhetoric, and the worldview and circumstances which surround both its composition and Aristotle's world in a larger sense. In essence, perhaps Neel's most valuable contribution to the field of rhetoric and composition study is in prioritizing a contextual framework for his arguments. Neel admirably shifts from past to present, from the Lyceum to the present-day composition classroom. Context is emphasized above all. Foregrounding is made essential, and regardless of one's opinion of Neel's occasional oddly self-deprecating style or his omnipresent political dissatisfaction, it is apparent that the author has done his homework. Shifts in textual direction make sense, and with savvy, Neel links discussions of 1960s Mississippi, two notable student essays, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and Aristotle's dissatisfaction with rhetoric as a practice, among other things, into one cohesive whole. Not an easy task, but one that Neel completes with precision and aplomb.

This carefully constructed context and digestible style set up what is a polemic at its core. The tone of Neel's writing, while oftentimes playful and delightful to read, is shadowed by a bitter tongue-in-cheek mournfulness toward the political nature of composition studies. Neel notes in the first paragraph of his Prologue, "I truly do not understand 'Aristotle'; I truly do not know 'rhetoric.' Since I am nothing but a sophist, any good Aristotelian (and perhaps any good rhetorician) would understand right away that I do not know anything at all" (1). This seems a bit suspect as an introduction to a text that includes a chapter called "In the Heart of the Heart of the Rhetoric." However, such dissonance is mitigated by the final chapter, "The Composition of Sophistry and the

Sophistry of Composition," a segment which ties together Neel's construction in entertaining, if somewhat sarcastic fashion.

The above quote ("I truly do not understand. . . I do not know anything at all") and the resigned tone of the "Sophistry" chapter frame nicely both Aristotle's and Neel's politics. Neel, the same man who "does not know rhetoric" and is not a rhetorician ("I am not a criminal"? ? ?) paradoxically provides an engaging and convincing defense of the field. And he accomplishes this not by strumming the "writing should be prioritized" guitar but by attacking rhetoric and composition, identifying it as a field yearning for acceptance yet sinking in the quicksand of professionalism at the expense of what should be its more human/humane mission. But Neel's beef goes beyond the execution of the profession to the philosophical underpinnings of pedagogies shaped by Aristotle, a man of expansive and admirable knowledge but less than satisfying moral beliefs in view of contemporary advancements in tolerance, acceptance, and democracy.

Chapter One, "The Rhetoric and the Politics of Slavery" commences Neel's diatribe against the politics that Aristotle, and the sociological/ideological context within which he composed the Rhetoric, have unconsciously impacted upon contemporary thinking and writing instruction. Here, Neel wastes little time in getting to the crux of the matter: like Aristotle's Rhetoric is informed by his Politics, so too are our pedagogies and profession influenced by our own political context. Furthermore, when appropriating Aristotelian principles in the classroom, we are implicit and explicit purveyors of Aristotle's politics, which Neel identifies as dangerous. In linking ancient Greek society with our twentieth century condition,

Neel chooses an uncomfortable but provocative connecting point—slavery. Aristotle’s view of subordinate man and disdain for the leveling effect of democracy overtly direct his *Politics* while bubbling just beneath the surface of the *Rhetoric*. According to Neel, “To Aristotle, slavery and all the concomitant vestiges of a hierarchical society simply are” (18). Rhetoric, a point Neel elaborates later, is not given priority in Aristotle’s hierarchy of discursive strategies, occupying a clearly subordinate position. Slavery, in contemporary composition instruction, then, can manifest itself in the faculty food chain, where composition instructors and adjuncts oftentimes are prey, or else in the enslavement of human students to a built-in, anti-human professionalism, employed in the interest of raising the stature of the field. Neel notes, “Composition studies as I envision it will always have an uneasy situation in the university because it never aims higher than the practical and productive; its theories can never exist for their own pure sake” (33). All of this comes after framing the chapter with an anecdote about racism and subjection in 1967 Mississippi. Such a framework and parallel throw into relief Neel’s venom toward those powers that expose and control certain groups in the academic community, be they composition instructors or first-year composition students, in the name of professionalism and heightened status.

Neel’s second chapter, “Metaphysics and the Demonstration of Rhetoric” continues his attack on Aristotle, but shifts from slavery and the overtly political to the birth of Aristotle’s rhetoric and the implicit corpus of beliefs that come with it, pre-installed and free of charge, when one implements Aristotelian principles in the classroom. Particularly interesting in this chapter is Neel’s attempt to reconcile the turbulent love/hate, necessary evil relationship that Aristotle has toward rhetoric. To Aristotle, rhetoric is inherently evil, for it deviates farther from truth and knowledge than did its forbears, demonstration and dialectic. However, Neel chuckles at the about-face Aristotle makes when he acknowledges rhetoric’s necessary role. To Neel, Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric was brought about by an elitist ideology and appropriated in order to communicate with the ignorant masses, whose limitations rendered them incapable of accessing truths set forth by other discursive mechanisms. Aristotle, who spends hundreds of pages discussing, delimiting, and ultimately decrying rhetoric, reduces his world to Greek v. barbarian and truth v. rhetoric. Neel contends, then, that professionals in the field of rhetoric and composition defend Aristotle and his principles simply because they have a stake in it. Be-

cause of this, rhetoricians are forced to defend an inferior, subordinate field in order to keep their jobs in a highly-charged, highly-competitive job market. Neel’s point is cutting, disturbing:

When Aristotle ‘saved’ rhetoric by dividing it into a ‘thought element’ versus everything else, and when he rehabilitated rhetoric by giving it a place at the very bottom of his system, he virutally guaranteed that an increasingly scientific world, a world controlled by professional discourse, would wish to rid itself of anything ‘merely rhetorical.’ (53)

Alas, the position of rhetoric, a discipline that even its most highly esteemed forefather deemed decadent, is at the bottom of the totem pole. Neel himself cringes at the eradication of democracy that such a hierarchy suggests—it erects, rather than razes, professional boundaries.

Neel continues his subversion of popularly held notions about Aristotle and the professional realm of rhetoric and composition in the third chapter, deliciously entitled, “Aristotle’s Beard, Or S(h)aving the Face of Professional Discourse.” According to Neel, not only is the ancient scholar in some ways responsible for the inferior position that composition instruction currently holds in the academy, but he is also to blame for the problems arising from professional discourse. Neel is at his intellectual best in this chapter, foregrounding well his trenchant discussion of Aristotle’s construction of a professional discourse, which Neel contends eliminates the human element in favor of the scientific. This contextual framing is accomplished through the use of two student essays, both poignant examples of high-quality writing at the first-year level, but vastly different in their “professionalism”—an example that Neel uses skillfully to illustrate inherent instructor biases. Neel cites that as teachers, we are uncomfortable reading the “human” student essay, preferring, instead, that text which most closely approximates the “professional” model we adhere to as scholars, a practice designed to enforce distance: “Because the purpose of professional discourse is to escape the human, professional discourse suffers immeasurably when an analyst reveals its dependency on the human” (90). After detailing Aristotle’s history as a Macedonian political agent, Neel locates the genesis of professional writing in Aristotle’s work, a product of his belief in hierarchy and division and his disbelief in democracy and the lackluster credentials of the masses. Neel’s conclusive warning against professionalizing the field of rhetoric and composition to the point of excluding the human element takes on an added strength when considering his own style.

His points and concerns are delivered clearly and concisely, with even his exegesis of Aristotle being tight and comprehensible, providing ideas that have merit for the professional rhetorician yet retain a refreshing aura of accessibility for other non-specialists.

But Neel is not finished deconstructing Aristotle. The fourth chapter, “In the Heart of the Heart of the Rhetoric,” as its title suggests, signifies Neel’s deepest descent into Aristotle’s treatise. By carefully detailing the contradictions in Aristotle’s own attempt to define and delimit the concept of rhetoric and its purpose, Neel illustrates, by virtue of Aristotle’s own equivocation, the fertile ground for discussion and discourse in the field of rhetoric and composition, including dialogue regarding ontology and epistemology. Aristotle’s repeated hedging and backtracking seem to amuse Neel; discussion of derision and celebration, as well as justification and analysis— all of which pervade throughout the Rhetoric— indicate to Neel that rhetoric as a profession has little to do with any concretized knowledge or permanent principles. According to Neel, each time that Aristotle comes close to arriving at a hard and fast principle of rhetoric, he immediately shies away because rhetoric is not made up of any absolute truths. What Aristotle has done, then, is “create(s) a place in professional discourse where one can be a professional analyst who claims no skill at all in doing the thing the analyst analyzes” (143). The term “rhetoric” remains ambiguous enough to allow for such criticism and conjecture. Rather than simply debate the implementation of principles, scholars are able to argue the very foundation of them due to the “transformation of rhetoric from a how-to course intended to guarantee successful public-speaking ability into a discourse about discourse. . . .” which Neel attributes to Aristotle’s own internal dialogue (143).

This aspect of Neel’s discussion is especially noteworthy because it is illustrative of the relationship he has with his most profound influence. Neel denies that he or Aristotle are rhetoricians, primarily because of his labored deconstruction of the term, which comes to fruition in the fifth chapter. But his attitude is amusing— unabashed admiration, gratitude, and acknowledgement of Aristotle’s influence mixed with concern, criticism, and vigilance. Indeed, Neel closes the fourth chapter by dismissing Aristotle’s value for style concealment by noting that such an attempt makes style contrived by nature. And what of the rhetorician, he who “needs no divine gift,” and instead “sets out to critique and describe a gift given to others” (176)? The rhetoric instructor “teaches analysis, not performance,” and this foregrounds Neel’s

final chapter.

“The Composition of Sophistry and the Sophistry of Composition” rounds out Neel’s study. It is *prima facie* a strange chapter in its proposition, but one that makes sense in light of the work preceding it. After discussing Aristotle’s disdain for sophistry as a profession filled with unethical money grubbers and characterized by a complete disregard for proof, Neel attempts to locate the scholar as sophist in the field of rhetoric and composition. According to Neel, sophistry, as defined by Aristotle and Plato, is preferable to professionalization and the boundaries it erects. Hence, the composition instructor shall inhabit a system that does not rely on true knowledge. Being a “sophist” seems to be Neel’s way of acknowledging on the one hand that the perfect rhetor as Aristotle, in all his contradictions, might endorse, does not exist. Instead, what does exist is a body of composition instructors, who are motivated by financial compensation and a validated status, riddled with doubt, unable to find truth or devise a methodology for finding it, and, relative to Aristotle’s idealism, are “bad, immoral, wicked, evil, base, corrupting, tricky, and dishonest” (195).

This seemingly tongue-in-cheek conclusion smacks with good-natured resignation, a dash of “yeah, right,” and a hint of frustration. Sophists, as Neel paraphrases Aristotle, “seek out the unresolvable paradox in any given situation” (193). Accessing rhetoric, it would then seem, is impossible in that its “pure” form might well be inaccessible even to Aristotle, who as Neel skillfully illustrates, wages war with himself over actual denotations and connotations. The more important paradox to Neel, though, is that the academy values and yearns for quality writing, yet at the same time it refuses to acknowledge, respect, or prioritize writing instruction. Neel seems to attribute much of the overall uncertainty characteristic of the profession’s status to Aristotle. *Aristotle’s Voice* sets out to deconstruct the romantic view of a rhetorical monolith. And at the very least, it re-situates Aristotle as the premiere influence on contemporary writing instruction— and all previous writing instruction informed by him as well.

In spirited fashion, Jasper Neel’s *Aristotle’s Voice* not only puts to rest some commonly held beliefs about this hallowed man of knowledge, but also questions the philosophical, political, and pragmatic core of contemporary writing pedagogies.

Neel’s fluid, accessible style, coupled with a willingness to question the profession that supports him, gives rise to a feeling in the reader that the author is a cred-

ible witness to the inequalities and inadequacies of the academy. Strangely enough, by not taking himself too seriously, Neel makes credible his serious message.

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