

Tropes of Politics: Science, Theory, Rhetoric, Action, John S. Nelson (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998. 291 pages).

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One of the most promising lines of research in contemporary rhetoric is publics theory, exemplified by Gerald Hauser's *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (1999) and Rosa Eberley's "From Writers, Audiences and Communities to Publics" (*Rhetoric Review* 18). Publics theory connects the pedagogical and the theoretical, and offers a way to place the political interests of contemporary composition in conversation with rhetorical issues of engagement and deliberation. Furthermore, current reflections on writing across the curriculum recommend that writing classes become engaged with issues and projects outside the classroom. (See, for example, Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt's "Writing Beyond the Curriculum," *College English* 62.) Given this turn in contemporary rhetoric, John Nelson's *Tropes of Politics* is especially timely. An application of the rhetoric of inquiry to the analysis of contemporary political science, Nelson's study can help to complement publics theory with a critique of the disciplinary work of public science; it may help to integrate work in composition and rhetoric with extremely interesting research in the rhetoric of inquiry.

Simply stated, the rhetoric of inquiry is a research program that examines modes of argument in the social and natural sciences. Associated most closely with the University of Iowa Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry (POROI), the rhetoric of inquiry has been developed by, for example, Nelson, Eugene Garver, Deirdre McCloskey, Herbert Simons, and James Boyd White. This field is useful especially to compositionists studying writing across the curriculum: both lines of research deal with the special logics of expert discourses; both deal with discourses that are consequential; both are self-consciously social constructionist in their analytic frames. Although scholars such as Charles Bazerman are recognized as authorities in both the rhetoric of inquiry and rhetoric and composition, there are many ways in which the rhetoric of inquiry and writing across the curriculum are oblivious to one another. Nelson's *Tropes of Politics*, for example, gives an exhaustive list of sources for the rhetoric of inquiry that includes only the briefest mention of writing across the curriculum. Similarly, the most recent essay on the history of writing across the curriculum—Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon's "Clearing the Air" (*College English* 62)—only briefly mentions

Bazerman's work, citing no other research in the rhetoric of inquiry.

Tropes of Politics may change this situation. Nobody writes more clearly than Nelson. The issues he takes up—those of representation and civic action—are compelling, and his work is much more pedagogically conscious than the textual analyses typical of the rhetoric of inquiry. (For example, Nelson gives a fascinating account of one of his own pedagogical experiments—an exercise in which students are invited to paraphrase a Katha Pollitt poem.) The book considers how discourses are produced, how academic disciplines construct knowledge, and how alternatives can be generated: all questions of interest to compositionists, especially scholars of writing across the curriculum.

The central exigency of *Tropes of Politics*, however, is not pedagogy but the development of an analytic research program in the rhetoric of inquiry that will enable it to rectify the discourses of the social sciences. Nelson wants to see the social sciences become more self-conscious, more efficacious, and more argumentative. He wants to see rhetoricians engage more closely with the particular arguments of specific academic disciplines, beginning with the specialized research problematics of his own discipline, political science. He wants the rhetoric of inquiry to work on two levels: to teach academics to argue better within their disciplines, and to work within disciplines to improve the level of public argument. He argues for these positions with all the informed passion of a scholar who has spent more than twenty years developing a line of research; taking all the risks of interdisciplinary work; and committing himself to difficult collaborations with rhetorical theorists, rhetoricians of science, and practicing social scientists from a dizzying variety of fields. He undertakes this project from the perspective of a committed political scientist, a scholar who is horrified by his discipline's obsession with positivist techniques (such as polling and surveying) and who has made deliberation both a method and an object of study.

The first section of *Tropes of Politics* is a series of arguments for argument. Nelson writes: "Perhaps the most obvious priority for rhetoric of political inquiry is the rhetorical analysis of actual argumentation in political science. Field by field, project by project, book by book, article by article, page by page, sentence by sentence: how does argument in political science in fact proceed?" It may be helpful in this context to ask two questions: What is the rhetoric of inquiry? Why should anyone be so obsessively worried about its direction?

We could tell the story of the rhetoric of inquiry by naming a series of academic conferences: the 1984 POROI Symposium at Iowa and two

conferences on discourse analysis at Temple University in 1985 and 1994. At these meetings, researchers in the human sciences confronted the anti-foundationalist turn, encountered rhetoric as a discipline capable of usefully describing arguments without relying on objectivist notions of truth, and discovered that their interdisciplinary collaboration could advance research programs in all of the human sciences. These early discussions are conveniently collected in John Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald McCloskey's *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (1987) and Herbert Simons' *The Rhetorical Turn* (1990). The extensive documentation in the first chapter of *Tropes* brings the story up to date.

The line of research developed by the rhetoric of inquiry can be seen as a response to two contrary impulses: studies in the sociology of science and the philosophical critique of foundationalism mounted specifically by deconstruction and more generally by poststructuralism (usually mediated through Richard Bernstein and Richard Rorty). In the 1980s, the strong program in the sociology of science and deconstruction were two entirely distinct intellectual movements: both looked closely and skeptically at authoritative practices (research in the natural sciences and the tradition of western philosophy, respectively). They found reason for skepticism: science presented itself as a disinterested search for objective and certain truth but was actually a way of making temporary sense of conflicting and ambiguous data; philosophy presented itself as a reflection on the possibility of certain knowledge, but actually concealed from the insecure and fragmentary subject its own problematic status.

Today, science studies and poststructuralism have morphed, repositioned themselves, and become mutually influential. To readers familiar with the work of Donna Haraway, they will seem very close indeed. However, when both movements stood as godparents to the infant rhetoric of inquiry, they were engaged in quite different projects. As a dutiful godchild, the rhetoric of inquiry has struggled to meet the obligations laid upon it by each of its intellectual parents; the gaps and contradictions between those obligations mark the much later, more developed work in *Tropes of Politics*. They motivate both the most interesting and the most frustrating moments in the book.

In the early 1980s, science studies worked through the careful analysis of quite concrete discursive practices (think of early Bruno Latour or of Haraway's studies of women primatologists). Researchers in this field made limited theoretical claims, focusing on local arguments, specific transformations of data, and the analysis of choices made by individual scientific workers. These studies quickly generated energetic

debate about science's claims to truth and objectivity. Researchers in the social sciences read arguments by sociologists of science as *a fortiori* refutations of objectivism and value neutrality in their own disciplines: if physicists were finding that particles and forces were created discursively, how could sociologists insist on the objective status of group identity or class formation? Science studies, then, laid one obligation on the rhetoric of inquiry: to determine, through direct engagement with the materials of academic study, how its objects are socially constructed.

But science studies were themselves conventional social sciences: they collected data, formed hypotheses, generated statistics, and studied trends. The rhetoric of inquiry's other godparent—deconstruction and poststructuralism—imposed on the infant discipline quite different scholarly obligations and a quite different model of research. Particularly as understood by Bernstein and Rorty, deconstruction ruled out the possibility of any assumptions of reference or representational adequacy in the social sciences and encountered this antifoundationalism with great anxiety. While science studies favored direct observation, case studies, or ethnographic observation, the deconstructive tropes emphasized close attention to the surface features of language, rapid movement among levels of the text, and the unraveling of the text's internal contradictions. Although very few texts in the rhetoric of inquiry were directly influenced by Foucault or Derrida, many researchers in this paradigm were convinced that deconstruction made foundationalism untenable and that the bases of rationality must be secured in an ethic of deliberation.

Research in science studies often found that the text under study was rhetoric "all the way down." But this moral was supported by a story: how pictures of finches were composed to support theories of natural selection, how psychoanalysts knew they were hearing free association, how appeals courts made decisions. While the moral was thin (sometimes even formulaic), the story was dense and circumstantial. At the same time, deconstruction and poststructuralism rendered all stories suspect, questioned the possibility of gaining any purchase on the real through detailed description (however mediated and self-conscious), and oriented reflection on the various levels of the written text in all its indeterminacy. The rhetoric of inquiry—mixed-up but overfunctioning child—patiently explained to its inattentive godparents that they really had a lot in common and embarked on a deeply contradictory program: detailed research on the production of expert knowledges, alternating with detached speculation on the canonic texts of a discipline. And so the rhetoric of inquiry presents the fascinating and instructive spectacle of an extremely self-conscious

research program, one that is engaged in constant methodological self-examination and one that is also totally at odds with itself. On the one hand, the rhetoric of inquiry wants to produce information—preferably distinct and novel information in the tradition of science studies—and, on the other hand, the rhetoric of inquiry distrusts all such information, understands the production of knowledge as an exercise of power, and affiliates with the playful and non-representational norms of deconstructive scholarship.

Both of these impulses are evident in *Tropes of Politics*. Indeed, they often complement each other. In chapter two, Nelson offers a very precise analysis of the recent history of political science. This chapter is full of information and is dense with local argument; it could serve as a map of contemporary political science and as a hand list of its tropes and figures. It repays the rhetoric of inquiry's debt to science studies. In chapter nine, Nelson discusses central myths or stories of political science, analyses why those myths are not the only ones that we need, and describes a classroom exercise in the production of new political myths and metaphors. His discussion turns on an understanding that discourse in political science is consequential and productive rather than a static representation of political life. This chapter is self-consciously deconstructive, although most literary critics would take issue with Nelson's use of "myth." Even though the methods that shape these two chapters are at odds, their specific arguments are complementary, and so the two chapters support each other. Nelson establishes a strong conceptual continuity between his early critique of political science (its avoidance of argument, its unexamined central terms, its heavy mortgage to liberalism) and the later discussion of political metaphors (monologic understanding of language, failure to open liberal ideology to reflection). Both the errant godparents of the rhetoric of inquiry would have reason to be proud.

At other points in *Tropes*, the impulse to study a specific discourse and to deconstruct the conditions of its possibility are at odds, and the argument of the book simply freezes. In chapter three, "Turning Underground into Approved Rhetorics," Nelson identifies confession as a genre that, if it existed, would demonstrate how a researcher moves an "underground" research method into the conventionally approved register of disciplinary talk. Nelson is correct: a confessional speech or essay in which a leading political scientist admitted to his or her reliance on an "underground" and devalued rhetoric of discovery would be a significant object of study. Analyzing such confessions would, as Nelson argues, teach us a great deal about the relations between underground and

approved social science. In fact, such genre analyses are highly valued within science studies for good reason. (Recall Bazerman's analysis of how scientists actually read abstracts in *Shaping Written Knowledge*.)

But Nelson faces an intractable problem: political scientists don't make disciplinary confessions. He writes that "the discipline in fact gives me not so much as a single clear case, let alone a continuing genre, that would qualify as confessional. . . ." Within the sociology of science, such a gap in the record would lead the researcher to analyze why a certain kind of performance is missing or to identify approximations of it, which is indeed Nelson's approach at the end of the chapter. But most of the discussion is focused on sheer absence. Nelson conjectures about places where confessions might occur—but don't. He thinks about things political scientists might confess—but never do. He rails against the absence of confessions, writing that the challenge "is to get political science to *confess* its underground rhetorics." In this local analysis, Nelson's account of the rhetoric of political science simply seems to be at odds with itself, unable to decide whether it is a rectification of current practices in the discipline or an analysis of how it does its work.

Similar tensions mark the last chapter of *Tropes*, "Turning Stands into Stances." Here, however, these tensions function more productively. Nelson distinguishes between "stands" (positions taken on principle) and "stances" (general attitudes, ways of carrying out politics as usual). The distinction between a stand and a stance operates both descriptively and analytically; it describes both the working rules of political agents and the theoretical consequences of positions within political science. In defining the relation between stand and stance, Nelson explores what is productive and what is static in contemporary politics without recourse to foundationalism, but also without simply reproducing liberal pluralism. Above all, this distinction offers a critical role for argument, the most consistent and persuasive of Nelson's investments in this volume.

As rhetoricians and compositionists consider how their own longstanding political investments can link the classroom to public life, political science offers a model—both promising and monitory—of an academic discipline deeply enmeshed in contemporary politics. What better way for us to learn from this model, make it usable, and reflect on it than Nelson's book, which is deeply rooted in rhetoric, explicit in its assumptions and program, instructive even in its lapses?