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In common with many composition teachers, I have in recent months drawn students’ attention especially carefully to public rhetoric. While covering persuasive argument, I have said several variations of, “We are in an election year. Pay attention in the next few months to how political ads and debates are constructed. Who is shaping the messages, and for what reasons? Who seems to be the target audience? How are emotions, facts, and values being used to persuade? Are these things being used unscrupulously or manipulatively?” In every class, at least a few students nod or laugh in wry recognition. We and our students recognize something missing from our public discourse, and many of us regard the study and teaching of argument as ways to be and train better citizens and thus possibly to create a better world.

John Gage, editor of the sixteen-essay collection The Promise of Reason: Studies in The New Rhetoric, tells us that Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s 1958 Traité de l’argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique (The New Rhetoric), the product of a decade of research amid the tumult of World War II-era Europe, recognized a similar lack and held a similar aspiration: to create “a new place for reason in a postwar world in which logical positivism and science seemed to some to have demonstrably failed to fulfill the promise of freedom” (1). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca themselves had the not inconsiderable goal of “a break with a concept of reason and reasoning due to Descartes which has set its mark on Western philosophy for the last three centuries” (1, emphasis in original). This collection, stemming from a 2008 conference at the University of Oregon marking The New Rhetoric’s fiftieth anniversary, brings together celebrations of, reflections on, and applications for this ambitious and influential text.

After Gage’s introduction and a biographical tribute from Perelman’s daughter, the essays fall into four sections. The first, “Conceptual Understanding of The New Rhetoric,” highlights Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s key concepts and probes the history of their writing of The New Rhetoric. Barbara Warnick highlights Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s innovative approach of studying arguments in their own contexts rather than privileging established formal frameworks. Jeanne Fahnestock assesses the strengths and weaknesses of their discussion of the intersections of style and content in argument. Loïc Nicolas adds a brief précis of Perelman’s “universal audience” concept. David Frank and Michelle Bolduc’s examination of the collaboration between Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, which focuses on how Olbrechts-
Tyteca's contributions have sometimes been minimized and applies The New Rhetoric to an understanding of collaborative writing, closes the section.

The second section, “Extensions of The New Rhetoric,” places Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in conversation with Charles Darwin, Kenneth Burke, and today’s French linguists. For Alan Gross, Darwin’s work demonstrates a way to expand The New Rhetoric’s notions of presence and visual argument. Richard Graff and Wendy Winn synthesize Burkean form-based Identification and Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca’s value-based Communion as different but connected ways of both constructing and addressing audiences. Roselyne Koren praises The New Rhetoric for providing a theoretical way to discuss subjective and value-based arguments in scientific and journalistic writing, genres that, she contends, many models simply treat as entirely objective and outside the realm of argumentation.

Section three, “The Ethical Turn in Perelman and The New Rhetoric,” reviews the World War II-era history surrounding The New Rhetoric and emphasizes argumentation’s social implications, then and later. Ray Dearin’s and Linda Bensel-Meyers’s essays concentrate on Perelman’s post-World-War-II work with UNESCO research on democracy, a term Perelman found problematic to define and vulnerable to manipulation by the unscrupulous. Jean Nienkamp argues that ethics proceeds by rhetorical means and that rhetoric has inherent ethical responsibilities, “that both are value-based action in the social world” (179).

The last and most wide-ranging section, “Uses of The New Rhetoric,” offers several pedagogical possibilities inspired by The New Rhetoric. James Crosswhite critiques conventional, acontextual models for teaching argument, asserting that The New Rhetoric provides “a richer and truer account of argument than the simpler models that can fit on a board or a screen and be explained in a fifty-minute hour” (193). Maria Freddi applies Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s analogical models to Richard Feynman’s uses of argument to teach science; Paula Olmos employs their observations to discuss traditional use of classical proverbs alongside modern-day use of movie catchphrases as means of connecting with an audience. Finally, Mark Hoffmann, insisting that “not all arguments are limited to their rhetorical situations” (243), uses concepts from The New Rhetoric in a case study of Tolstoy’s The Kingdom of God Is Within You as an essence-based argument.

This collection clearly aims to both honor The New Rhetoric and re-invigorate the research and teaching of such familiar and vital rhetorical concepts as audience awareness, ethos, figurative language, allusion, and social context. Respect for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s monumental work imbues the essays, as does a sincere desire to apply The New Rhetoric rigorously and meaningfully to researching and teaching argument. The essays demonstrate an equal commitment to thinking creatively and carefully about the rhetorical choices and aims implicit in that very research. The New Rhetoric is honored, interrogated, and expanded upon by the contributors. Even after more than 500 pages, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca themselves
felt they had “barely scratched its [argumentation’s] surface” (509) and were eager for other scholars to carry that work forward. Just as they sought to expand rhetoric beyond purely rational, formal models, scholars inspired by them seek, in this volume, to expand its application to a broad range of fields, texts, audiences, and situations.

The Promise of Reason: Studies in The New Rhetoric is ambitious and sometimes unorthodox in its scope, and this varied, shifting focus can at times read as a weakness of the collection. Because the collection pursues several different avenues, the different sections do not necessarily cohere smoothly and treatment of some ideas feels a bit rushed. This same diversity, though, means that this collection will prove useful to scholars and students across composition and beyond. Beginning and advanced composition teachers will benefit from the theoretical, historical, and practical discussions of argumentation. Theorists and historians of composition, science writing, linguistics, philosophy, and ethics will likewise find valuable insights about uses and influences of rhetoric in their fields. The relevant individual chapters would fit smoothly on both graduate and undergraduate syllabi in all of these fields or be useful to researchers and students as supplemental resources. The collection as a whole would be a solid addition to the reading list of graduate rhetoric surveys as well as courses in composition theory and the history of composition. The Promise of Reason’s variety makes it a useful primer on the first fifty years of New Rhetoric scholarship. The sheer number of conversations this short collection manages to pursue bolsters that spirit and makes The Promise of Reason, as Gage hopes, a starting point for “the next fifty years” (2) of the same.

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Works Cited