

The Arrival of the Sophist: The Sea in Aelius Aristides' Prologues

Aelius Aristides, who suffered chronic illnesses, often informs his audience or reader(s) about the conditions that account for the medium in which the given *logos* is delivered (Ors. 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 33, 42, 43, 46, 53). This is most obviously the case when Aristides is apologizing for being unable to physically attend the given occasion. This is not necessarily surprising: a letter instead of a person probably needed justification. But importantly, even when he is able to deliver his remarks in person, he tells us about the circumstances that allowed him to attend. Again and again, the sea is invoked as the material medium that brings him to the *bema* (Or. 26, 42, 43, 46 (Ors. 27 and 33 also involve the sea)). His ability to speak is then an extension of the sea's agency.

Charles Behr, the English-language editor and biographer of Aristides, noted the impressive role water played in Aristides' corpus: "Aristides' will power and mastery of his physical debilities is clearly brought out by his excessive use of water metaphors ... as well as the prominent place which water had in his dreams." He goes on to at once propose and dismiss a psychological interpretation: "The usage bears an affinity to Adler's interpretation of water as a symbol of the urge to power, but it is best to avoid all together the conflicting interpretations of doctrinaire psychology" (Behr 1969, 163). More recently, scholars have noted the correspondence between Aristides' body and landscape (Petsalis-Diomidis, 2008) and Janet Downie dedicates a chapter in her book on Aristides to the importance of bathing (2013, ch.3). But no scholar has tackled the question Behr reluctantly poses about the role of water in Aristides' corpus as a whole. Of course, this question is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, these “arrival scenes” are an unremarked aspect of the larger economy of water metaphors in Aelius Aristides’ corpus and they begin to provide an answer to the larger question.

I argue that the sea’s role as a body of transit invests Aristides with agency beyond the mere capacity to be present. It invests him with the ability to speak. Using Diana Coole’s new materialist concept of agentic capacities, I argue that the arrival is integral to the way that water’s agency flows through Aristides and brings him to what he calls the “calm harbor” (Or. 42.1) from which he can address his audience like the Odyssean figure he often aspires to be (esp., 48.60 and 48.65).

Bibliography

Behr, C. A., 1969. *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales*. Chicago.

Coole, D. “Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities.” *Political Studies* 53:124-142.

Downie, J. 2013. *At the Limits of Art: A Literary Study of Aelius Aristides' Hieroi Logoi*. Oxford.

Petsalis-Diomidis, A. 2008. “The Body in Landscape.” In W. V. Harris & B. Holmes, eds., *Aelius Aristides between Greece, Rome, and the gods*. Leiden: Brill: 131-150.