Reviews


Reviewed by Robert J. Connors, University of New Hampshire

Discussions of invention are always informed by certain predispositions toward their subject. Using the term is the tip-off. Like users of the terms “cognition,” or “construction,” we can usually assume that someone talking about invention believes in its existence, and probably in its importance too. Simply to construe communicative processes in terms of invention is to admit to a large baggage of ideas dating back to classical rhetoric. To discuss the history of the decay of the canon of invention over the past two centuries is to underwrite many of those classical ideas and to view with suspicion their submergence in a muddle of modern thought. That’s exactly what Sharon Crowley is proposing to do in *The Methodical Memory*, the first work of revisionist history to appear in composition studies with a deeply conservative agenda.

Crowley wants to tell us in this book why current-traditional rhetoric has been an enterprise of only marginal usefulness in teaching students to write. The story of invention between 1775 and the present happens to be her way into this question, and though a great deal of her exposition is about theory, her interests are not, finally, in purely theoretical history. She wants to tell us how we inherited a rhetoric that had fallen to pieces, and her answer is one which will surprise many people. We have, after all, a standard version of this story in new-rhetorical history. We have been used to thinking that the history of composition has been bleak because it was so cut off from modern ideas and psychological considerations. Composition sold out its eighteenth-century heritage and the epistemological insights of George Campbell and Hugh Blair; it did not give the individual enough freedom; it was concerned only with correctness; it paid too little attention to the writer’s thought processes; it only wanted to make the writer useful to his or her society. Only lately have we transcended this outmoded current-traditionalism.
This self-congratulatory vision has been our received wisdom for the past thirty years. Too simple, says Sharon Crowley, too simple. Her claim in this book is that the decline of invention in composition over the past two-hundred years was the direct result of the influence of Blair and Campbell, whose writer-centered theories of thought led directly to the downfall of socially-oriented topical invention and set the stage for modern antinventional theories of writing. Current-traditional rhetoric was not, as we had supposed, a survival of premodern prescriptive thought, resisting the encroachments of rationality. It was, Crowley asserts, the result of modern thought itself, and its weaknesses are the weaknesses of unexamined modern individualistic belief of all kinds. This is Crowley's frontal assault on modern rhetoric, and she argues for it thoughtfully throughout this book.

Before Campbell, of course, invention existed as the classical topical system. The topoi were the property of no one person; they were, in fact, a kind of common ground where anyone could go to survey the different kinds of communal beliefs that could be worked into rhetorical arguments. In the eighteenth century, however, the notion of empirical evidence usurped the idea of topical invention. For George Campbell, the modern rhetorical theorist par excellence, the focus of invention had to be on the ways the mind worked while perceiving and ordering sense data. Invention was author-centered for Campbell, focused on the individual mind as it functioned. This worked well as theory, but Crowley points out that this idea had serious pedagogical disadvantages: when used prescriptively, "it demanded that rhetors bring one crucial asset to the act of composing: a full and self-reflective mind." This was a problem, especially to those teaching young people.

Campbell was the first to suggest that invention was introspective (or retrospective) rather than externalized and communal, as it had been in classical systems. He and Richard Whately proposed invention ideas based in associationist psychology, and although Whately preferred logical analysis to the empirical observations that Campbell favored, both writers were more interested in the mental workings of the individual writer than in the older communal ideas of topical invention.

Individual mental processes now became the principles of invention. The main problem with this revolution in invention, says Crowley, is that it was in many ways irremediably arhetorical. Be reifying a general "mental process," it seemed unable to take into consideration the fact that people were not all alike. Because of the principle of sympathy, inventing and arranging material by way of following one's mental processes was all one had to do; telling the truth about one's experience became tantamount to persuading all other people (who had exactly similar processes) to accept it. Practically, this led to the decline of ethos and pathos in rhetorical theory following Campbell.
The result of this eighteenth-century theory was nineteenth-century reduction: centering invention in the mind of the individual author, seeking material only in observation and analysis, and the resultant privileging of scientific-logical or expository discourse, as it would be called in pedagogy. The inventional process for this discourse could be exactly represented in texts and judged by sharable criteria. "Intellectual prescriptions," as Crowley puts it, could be enforced because they "were assumed to be natural to all minds."

What seemed to be left in place of the older communal aspects of topical invention was genres, which are as much related to arrangement as they are to invention. What eighteenth-century theorists called "method" turns orderly activity of mind into a program for discovery, and natural arrangement is the result of placing elements that entered the mind just as they had entered. The ways in which elements entered the mind could be replicated in different kinds of writing, and rhetoric turned from topoi to genres—genres that were organized by intention.

This intentionalist element of genre theory is a key point in Crowley's argument. The new model of invention that appeared was subject-based, but it was also aims-based: a writer had to have a subject to write on and an object in view for what he or she would do with the subject. (Paradoxically, this author-centered psychological theory, because it was essentially empirical, had to ask writers to look outside themselves for material.) Given a subject and an aim, what need was there for any "special" ways of treating them? Let the natural processes of the mind operate, said the textbook authors and theorists. Finally, the idea that invention was itself defensible or teachable came under sustained question. Some introspectionists did not think that invention could be taught at all. As John S. Hart put it, "No amount of ingenuity or pumping will draw water from a well that is dry." The new invention of the nineteenth century was problematical in other ways: it glossed over differences between rhetorical situations, and it made little attempt to consider audience.

Finally, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, textbook authors lost touch with the theoretical bases that underlay their prescriptions. Current-traditional rhetorical became atheoretical. Invention became the simple injunction to "select, narrow, amplify," and compelled the use of prescriptive outlining despite the fact that it simply did not work well. Generic conventions like the modes (which Crowley acronymizes as "EDNA") and the methods of exposition took over for inventional concepts. The history of invention in current-traditional rhetoric, says Crowley, is the story of authority devolving from authors into texts.

All this is quite a challenge to modern thought in rhetorical study, especially to those who have hewn to Wilbur Samuel Howell's line about the well-deserved victory of eighteenth-century British thought over the dark forces of primitive classical thought. Rhetorical modernism has always been
bankrupt in some ways, claims Crowley, and current-traditional rhetoric is not a distortion of it so much as a logical working out of some of its premises. The allegiance of new rhetoric to quasi-scientific models of psychological truth made it ignore the necessary element of rhetorical interpretation in all writing.

The problem with modernism in rhetoric, says Crowley, is that it is too simplistically oriented toward the individual and his or her aims. Here Crowley differs sharply with James Kinneavy, who got us used to thinking of current-traditional rhetoric as a modes-oriented rather than an aims-oriented approach. Current-traditional rhetoric is an aims-oriented approach, says Crowley, in the sense that some sort of aim must exist before a mode can be chosen, and that is its problem. To simplify the complexities of the rhetorical situation down to the question of what a writer intends (as writers all the way from Campbell to McCrimmon do) is to radically ignore other important elements, especially audience and communal exigencies. Unless we can bring the full communal complexity of the rhetorical situation back to our teaching of invention, says Crowley, it will continue to be impoverished and only provisionally useful to our students.

Whether you find its argument completely persuasive or not, this is an admirable book. Like all of Crowley's historical work, it shows a careful reading of primary sources and serious thought about their meanings. The reading here is not always easy, and in many ways this is a book that will appeal to theorists and historians more than to teachers; Crowley's sometimes lengthy quotes and précis of material may be a bit dull for those not already involved in the mysteries of Samuel Newman or A.S. Hill. But in every chapter there are powerful and persuasive gems of analysis gleaming from the pages, and Crowley's own lively writing style helps make dry parts readable.

There is much that Crowley does not try to do here. There is no attempt to make this book any sort of complete history of composition teaching since Campbell. Historiographically, she takes the text-based approach of Howell rather than the wider cultural sweep of, say, George Kennedy, and concentrates on theory and its pedagogical implications rather than on cultural and social issues in composition history. She makes no attempt to choose a "hero" figure and document his or her losing battle against the gathering forces of current-traditional rhetoric, and neither are Campbell or the nineteenth-century rhetoricians villains; this is not agonistic history.

*The Methodical Memory* is an argument—a worked-out, well supported historical argument from definition and also from consequence. You may not accept the argument. It may not seem to you that George Campbell was a sort of early Linda Flower or Peter Elbow, or that current-traditional rhetoric is based on psychological individualism so much as it is on raw teachability, or that ethos and pathos are as lacking in current-traditional rhetoric as Crowley claims. But you will be challenged by this book to think
in new ways, and to examine some hoary received wisdom, and perhaps to revise some fondly held prejudices. And in this particular corner of the human barnyard, any historical author who can make us do these things deserves our encomia.


Reviewed by Jasper Neel, Vanderbilt University

Few books in composition studies have been as eagerly awaited as Susan Jarratt's new book on the sophists. Like Louise Phelps's Composition as a Human Science and Knoblauch and Brannon's Rhetorical Tradition and the Teaching of Writing, Jarratt's Rereading the Sophists has been discussed for several months prior to its release. Also like those books, both of which have been important for composition studies, Jarratt's book is likely to raise the hackles of some readers. As I will explain below, I have some reservations about the book myself, but on the whole there is no doubt at all that it is an important contribution to the field, a book that all serious students of rhetoric and composition must read.

The book has two intertwined motives. First, Jarratt seeks from the sophists a theoretical foundation for the standard, politically correct pedagogy that nearly all of us in composition studies subscribe to these days. Second, she attempts to use the sophists, particularly Protagoras and Gorgias, to discover a rhetoric that stands outside the standard logos-mythos conflict popularized by Havelock and Ong. Embedded in these two goals is an attempt to link the ancient sophists with contemporary feminist theory. While most readers are likely to feel that Jarratt stretches her evidence occasionally, everyone who reads the book is likely to learn about the sophists, the history of rhetoric (as well as historiography itself), and composition theory.

In places the book is spectacular. Jarratt carefully teases out the Aristotelian vocabulary and mind-set through which we inevitably read the fifth-century sophists, brilliantly juxtaposing Kerford with Enos to let Kerford's prejudiced vocabulary show. She offers a devastating critique of rhetoric, showing that the absence of women from the canon prior to 1950 is not the fault of silent women, but rather is the fault of a contentious, quite male notion of rhetoric as verbal combat. She gives a perceptive definition of rhetoric, explaining that "rhetoric, because of its commitment to action, must be able to move from critique to reconstruction," something that the discourses and the very lives of Protagoras and Gorgias do.