RHETORICAL TRADITIONS AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING
by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon
Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1984

Many contemporary rhetoricians are attempting to make the shady lady of rhetoric respectable. Ever since she was demoted to the status of mistress of logic by Boethius in the medieval university, she has been associated with mere shallow show and garish adornment. Some scholars are trying to shake off her tawdry past by trotting out her venerable ancestors—Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, et al. C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon oppose this effort because of the outmoded intellectual baggage that is packed in their theories. Knoblauch and Brannon see that the only way to reestablish rhetoric is to raise her own consciousness as to who she is. This misguided lady will gain respectability through recognizing that at heart she is an authentic maker of meaning. Rhetoric is nothing less than a personal construction of reality through the power of words—created for oneself and one's reader. What rhetoric can do is organize experience through symbolic action, achieving coherence by rendering "articulate and therefore intelligible the welter of images, thoughts and experiences that comprise a writer's awareness" (62).

This is not to say that this newly respectable (Continued on page 6)
rhetoric has no parents; but hers are not the ancient rhetoricians who saw knowledge as “out there”; instead they are those who see knowledge-making as a process and composing as a natural extension of the mind’s restless effort to make meaning out of what is sensed. In the same enlightening way that Janet Emig (“The Tacit Tradition,” in The Web of Meaning, Boynton/Cook, 1983) toured us among the portraits of our intellectual ancestors in the fields of cognitive psychology and education, so Knoblauch and Brannon show us the gallery of our philosophical forbears whose world view undergirds what they term “modern rhetoric.” Descartes saw learning and composing as inseparable; Kant insisted on the critical role of the mind in creating experience; Alfred North Whitehead saw reality as process; Ernst Cassirer pointed out that our image-worlds do not “merely reflect the empirically given, but . . . produce it in accordance with an independent principle” (60); and Susanne K. Langer put philosophy in a new key in her insistence on the organic coalescence of mind and nature through symbols.

In prose refreshingly free of academic jargon, Knoblauch and Brannon present an honest, authentic, uncompromisingly uneclectic position, one shared by an ever-widening community of scholars and teachers. They remind us that we have to make a choice. If we refuse to decide which theoretical framework is to inform our teaching strategies, we end up with a hodgepodge of practice. Writing Projects are based on the set of assumptions Knoblauch and Brannon present. Summer Institute participants are nurtured in environments that foster their own engagement in the symbolic activity of making meaning.

Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle see the discipline of rhetoric “poised at the moment when, although there is a set of values and commonly held assumptions about where to look and what to see, there is still no fully articulated, explicit theoretic system. . . . For the sake of the discipline it seems to many to be necessary at this stage to articulate a systematic theory or metatheory consistent with common assumptions and values” (Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, Canadian Council of Teachers of English, 1980, 176). Knoblauch and Brannon’s analysis of the epistemology and the view of the nature of knowledge and of the functions of discourse that characterize modern rhetoric go a long way toward building such a systematic theory or metatheory.

Knoblauch and Brannon’s goal is to persuade teachers to understand and respect the rhetoric of the ancients, but at the same time to see the points at which their hold is still on them in inappropriate ways. If teachers are unaware of the assumptions that underlie the skill and drill emphasis on form and style in most contemporary composition textbooks, they are unlikely to develop a “sensible pedagogy, consistent with the best available research on how people learn to write and how their learning can be assisted” (169). Teachers need to see themselves not as imparters of information but as nurturers of competence.

This book—as important as it is—is not without flaws. The most serious is the lack of an index and bibliography; this is precisely the type of book that needs both. There are some exaggerated claims or erroneous over-generalizations that at best leave troublesome questions. Here are two examples: Many contemporary rhetoricians would question the preemption of the term “modern rhetoric” for the set of assumptions Knoblauch and Brannon represent. Certainly those who advocate neo-Aristotelianism or tagemics might consider their positions a part of modern rhetoric. Another example is on page 22. They state that “of all the intellectual systems that once animated the classical world, only the concepts of ancient rhetoric [are] preserved in the hearts, if not consciously in the minds of traditional writing teachers.” This denies the present power of such ancient intellectual systems as Aristotelian poetics or Platonism in its modern form.

In a book as gratifyingly comprehensive in scope as this one, it is tempting to dwell on the thinkers they have omitted. The coherence they achieve in the face of their scope is commendable, and to have covered all sources would have, of course, made this a multi-volume series. The one theorist they should not have left out, however, despite the constraints of length, is James Moffett, whose contribution to modern rhetoric has probably had more impact on teachers below the college level than any of the authors they have mentioned.

Our profession needs what Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing provides—a critical look at the classic rhetorical tradition by insiders, those who share our assumptions, values, and teaching strategies. For we are a community, a group of scholars, researchers,
teachers who are operating out of the same world view, who share the same tacit tradition, who have transcended the current-traditional paradigm that has dominated composition instruction for the past century and a half. As Freedman and Pringle put it, "The intensity of the communal response to Hirsch (The Philosophy of Composition) may very well mean . . . that he has stepped outside, or is speaking to us from the outside, some invisible bounds. The sense of Hirsch as an outsider, of course, defines us as a community" (Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, 176).

As Knoblauch and Brannon put it, "Students deserve intellectually sophisticated teachers who make reasoned instructional choices within contexts provided by a modern philosophical perspective" (98). Such teachers will be able to defend their coherent and purposeful practices in the face of very real pressures from the public and colleagues to operate on a very different set of assumptions. I wholeheartedly endorse these authors' assumptions: viewing writing as process rather than outcome, as organic rather than mechanistic, and as competence to be developed rather than skill to be learned. If these tenets are yours, you too will find your intellectual home within these pages.

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**Book Review**

**WRITING YOUR WAY**
by Peter Stillman
Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1983

Even the title of Peter Stillman's book, *Writing Your Way*, reminds us writing teachers of something we already know, yet occasionally lose sight of. For any learning to attain personal meaning, students must invest some of their experiences, their knowledge, a part of themselves. In his introduction, Stillman describes the exciting and powerful side of writing and urges students to let it "serve as a way to find shapes and names for the world as you have come to know it; to make meaning; to find on paper what you already know and feel." He calls his approach unorthodox because the writing activities are directed to the writer, rather than the mastery of a set of rules. Self-discovery, the realization by the student that he is a writer, is Stillman's aim.

The tone of the book is humorous and easy; the lightness almost fools the reader until the writing tasks begin. He emphasizes the hard work, the risk taking and sometimes painful self-exposure writing brings, while warning against taking anything too seriously. What results is an unusual mixture of fun-to-read text and challenging writing suggestions. Stillman stealthily transforms the reader into a writer with his game-like writing activities. No theory is preached to the student, but each chapter packs in much of what we know about how the writing process works.

I recommend Stillman's book for teacher guided use in the middle school and secondary classroom; it is a refreshing ideas manual. Every chapter stands by itself and promises a successful writing experience. One or all of the chapters could be modified, or used as is, to fit into a preexisting writing program. At the elementary level, many of the activities, especially those which incorporate drawing, could be adjusted to suit younger students. The book would be a strong backbone for a freshman composition course where students desperately need to build confidence in their writing abilities.

Taking the book a chapter here and a chapter there is entertaining and worthwhile because each chapter includes three or four writing activities followed by discussions focused on specific writing skills. Stillman constantly tells the writer to make these newly acquired techniques a frequent part of his writing; however, he tells this by explaining the process the writer has just gone through, not by italicizing in red a rule to follow before writing. This approach, this coming in the backdoor by writing first and discussing later, consistently gives the student writer his own writing to analyze and learn from; *Writing Your Way* can be paraphrased as, "How to