

## Rhetoric in Crisis?: The View from Here

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The questions prompting this issue of *Enculturation* project a crisis state: rhetoric has been left behind, the rhetorical "turn" has been re-turned, we in composition are "over" rhetoric like a fleeting relationship. While other contributors may respond to the question with more comprehensive surveys of journal articles, conference presentations, or tenure-track jobs, I offer an admittedly located perspective—an angle of vision suggesting, preliminarily, that rhetoric continues to thrive in several corners of academic and public space.

Consider the following items:

### *Public sphere*

Since 9/11/01, the mainstream news media, as well as left-of-center sources, have published a significant number of articles commenting on the various kinds of rhetoric used by the president and his administration, journalists and pundits, and ordinary people in their attempts to come to terms with the events and their aftermath, now including a not-quite-completed war in Iraq. Here is a small sample from a range of sources: Karen DeYoung, "A Rhetorical Weave on Iraq. Statements on Arms hunt Reflect Fissures in Administration" (*Washington Post*, 5 Dec. 2002: A25); Joan Didion, "Fixed Opinions, or The Hinge of History" (*New York Times Review of Books*, 16 Jan. 2003: 54-57); John Lancaster, "'Bully' Remark Earns Biden a Lesson in Wartime Rhetoric" (*Washington Post*, 29 Oct. 2001: A15); Louis Menard, "Faith, Hope, and Clarity. September 11th and the American Soul" (*New Yorker*, 16 Sept. 2002: 98-104); Mary McNamara and Lynell George, "When Evil Itself Becomes the Primary Foe" (*Los Angeles Times*, 18 Sept. 2001: A3); Maura Reynolds, "'Axis of Evil' Rhetoric Said to Heighten Dangers" (*Los Angeles Times*, 21 Jan. 2003: A17); Arundhati Roy, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" (*The Guardian*, 29 Sept. 2001); Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics, and 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Susan Sontag, "War? Real Battles and Empty Metaphors," (*New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2002: A25); Daniel Uribe, "Rally Acts as Breeding Ground for Name Callers" (*New University*, University of California, Irvine, 19 Nov. 2001: 14).

### *Publication*

The number of presses with lists of significant titles in rhetoric is impressive: Southern Illinois University, SUNY, the University of South Carolina, Cambridge University, University of Chicago, University of Pittsburgh, and Utah State University Presses. The books have been submitted to the competition for a new Rhetoric Society of America book award.

The second edition (1992) of the MLA's *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures* included an essay on "rhetoric and composition." For the third edition, that category has been divided into two separate essays, one devoted solely to rhetoric.

W. W. Norton and Co. has contracted with five scholars of rhetoric to produce an anthology of writing and rhetoric.

### *Profession*

A new meta-organization, the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, will hold its first conference in September of 2003. The Rhetoric Society of America has recently reorganized to accommodate its growing membership, now offering prizes for notable dissertations and books about rhetoric.

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From the items above I've drawn the conclusion that rhetoric is alive. But is it well? It thrives, but does it flourish? Perhaps I'm sanguine about rhetoric's status because of low expectations.

Consider this parallel counter-evidence:

### *Public sphere*

The person on the street, or in a campus-wide faculty meeting, for that matter, greets the announcement of my academic field of specialization with as much puzzlement today as twenty years ago when I selected it.

### *Publication*

Those who write about rhetoric of various sorts in contemporary literary theory do so, for the most part, in ignorance of the field of rhetoric and composition. A single case in point is the excellent collection, *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice* (Stanford UP, 1990), edited by Stanford professors John Bender (English and Comparative Literature) and David E. Wellbery (German). The editors narrate in their introduction the "end" of rhetoric as an organizing discipline in Western higher education in the eighteenth century and its subsequent "return" in the guise of the "rhetoricity" saturating contemporary literary theory. They fail to mention the fact that a course of study at the graduate and undergraduate levels closely related to that curriculum whose end they announce has been actively developed and taught for at least the past three decades in U.S. universities.

### *Profession*

I earned a degree from a strong Ph.D. program in rhetoric (at the University of Texas at Austin) and taught for sixteen years in another (at Miami University). But I have never studied or taught in a department organized centrally around rhetoric: its histories, theories, and practices. My current employer, the University of California system, with its nine campuses, almost 200,000 students and perhaps 5,000 or more tenure-track (or "ladder-rank," in the local terminology) faculty, claims to be the premier public university in the nation (or the world, depending on whom you ask). The system presently includes a total of eight faculty members who profess rhetoric and composition.

What constitutes a "crisis"? What outcomes are produced by a rhetoric of crisis? As rhetoricians, we should be able to answer the second question, if not the first. My initial response to the questions posed by the editors of this special issue was a desire to distance myself from an invitation to disciplinary self-pity: oh, the poor rhetoricians. Where there is a specific event—an article by a prominent compositionist attacking theory (and by implication the link between rhetoric and composition), the loss of a significant academic publication about rhetoric (to offer two examples I know of)—a vigorous response is appropriate. But a generalized proclamation of "crisis" seemed likely to lead to unproductive breast-beating. On reflection, I've discovered that my initial response may come from an urge toward professional self-protection: a need to convince myself that things really are fine, rhetorically speaking. Whether or not rhetoric is in crisis, there is certainly value in reflecting on its status, not only in relation to composition studies but in the academy more generally and in public spaces beyond, where we would hope that our rhetorical teaching and research might have far-reaching effects.

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**Citation Format:**

Jarratt, Susan. "Rhetoric in Crisis?: The View from Here." *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003):  
[http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5\\_1/jarratt.html](http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/jarratt.html)

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