

# Book Review

## *The Vocation of a Teacher: Rhetorical Occasions 1967-1988* by Wayne C. Booth

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Booth, Wayne C. (1988). *The Vocation of a Teacher: Rhetorical Occasions 1967-1988*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. xviii, 1-353. ISBN 0-226-06582-0 (paper). US \$14.95.

This book is a collection of addresses (and one or two previously published articles) written for diverse audiences during a period of twenty years. Booth fans, whatever their disciplinary interest, will find the book an entertaining, even at moments perhaps a thrilling read. The response of others is likely to differ according to their degree of interest in the history and nature of recent American college and university education and their commitment to the teaching of rhetoric in those institutions. Booth's professional role changed a good deal in the course of twenty years, as did American academic life and its social context. What Booth had to say did not. Some fifteen years Booth's junior, however, all my professional life I have learned from him. I'm still learning. For example, as a sometime speaker myself on the academic circuit, I have learned a lot about that craft from this anthology of masterful speeches.

The book's title is somewhat misleading. The topic is the vocation of a particular kind of teacher: an English teacher and literary scholar turned academic statesman who achieved well-deserved professional renown in all three capacities. The topic is also the vocation of an academic dean.

Except for passages that discuss the place of rhetoric in higher education, the book mainly addresses issues of critical, long-standing importance that academic administrators tend to think a lot about but that we college and university teachers ordinarily don't, although, Booth believes, we should. The most serious public issues he treats that remain unresolved today are the responsibility of graduate schools for the scandalously depressed academic job market and the failure of the American public to support education adequately—primary and secondary schools as well as colleges and universities.

In short, in this book Booth is a secular preacher. His sermons instruct us thoughtfully and often engagingly about what the goals of the academic profession ought to be and how we ought to achieve those goals: "The [American] public," he told an audience of *Time* magazine editors and reporters in 1971 for example, "is grossly in need of re-education about the very nature of life itself, about life in political society, about the necessities and limits of human institutions, and finally about the grounds for our various faiths for resolution of conflict."

I have no doubt, on the evidence of statements made in later years, that Booth would stand by this recommendation today. Booth is in favor of demanding more respect and better pay for undergraduate teachers, teaching undergraduates to think critically, and refining college education as an instrument of cultural uplift. He's

against dry-as-dust scholarship, the commercial exploitation of academics (the scandal of high paid stars riding the backs of impoverished, overworked part-time instructors), and intellectual vacuity.

Every serious academic can learn something from Booth's conception of true scholarship. The chapter entitled "The Scholar in Society" (1981) is Booth's response to an invitation by the Modern Language Association to contribute to a "volume of advice to beginning scholars in the humanities." Booth defends the autonomy of scholarship against those who maintain that scholarship cannot be autonomous because scholars are inevitably biased in cultural, political, and other ways. Then he explores the implications of what he calls the five "virtues required for scholarship (and thus *taught by scholarship*)."

These virtues are Honesty ("we must suppress our commitments in the service of what we know"), Courage ("the scholar is the only person charged by society to carry the burden of thought to its extremes, even when thought hits back"), Persistence ("ask any scholar whose book or article has made a difference for you how long she worked on it. For most books the answer will be 'from five to ten years,' often it is 'all my life'"), Consideration (scholars consider "'the state of the question' as others have considered it" and make their "results as intelligible to other scholars as the inherent difficulties of the subject allow"), and Humility (scholars test "their powers for discovering truth and [discover] instead vaster and vaster domains of ignorance").

Booth is aware that, as this list of "virtues" (or "powers" or "habits" or "traits") suggests, the book may strike some readers as a collection of tracts. It may also strike some readers as a book that could only have been written by a long-standing member (as graduate student, professor, dean, and distinguished service professor) of the University of Chicago community. It has Chicago's high mindedness. Not for nothing has Booth been a member of the

Committee on Ideas and Methods there. It has its share of Chicago's country-cousin petulance ("We too often saw some second-rater from Princeton or Columbia consulted, while our bevy of Nobel laureates was ignored"). And it has a good deal of Chicago's traditional, quixotic obsession with unifying higher education. If one were to point to a single theme that runs throughout the book, that would be it.

The parts of the book that *Informal Logic's* readers are likely to find of greatest interest are the sections on the nature of rhetoric and, in Booth's view, its potential as a force for unifying college and university education. To apply "rhetoric" as a cover term for all intelligent human activity as Booth does, however, may strike some readers as extravagant. The book's two most densely argued chapters focus on this issue. "Mere Rhetoric, Rhetorology, and the Search for a Common Learning" (1981) is addressed "to those who do not teach English, but who believe that something called 'English' should be taught." Its thesis is that most academics are skilled "in the arts of reasoning in our specialties" but are "totally unskilled ... in the art of reasoning together about shared concerns" such as institutional goals and curriculum design. Booth calls that art of communal reasoning "rhetoric" and defends the term against its common prefix "mere."

To do so, he subdivides rhetoric into two types. "Rhetoric B" is not the art of persuasion but Aristotle's more general notion of a capacity for discovering possible means of persuasion. It is necessary, Booth says, "where simple appeals to obvious facts or unquestioned logical proofs are not available." Somewhat disappointingly, he does not examine here how to enlarge this capacity in students except to recommend close study of Aristotle and Cicero.

"Rhetoric A," in contrast, is "the art not just of discovering, but also of appraising the values we share." It is therefore a "supreme art of inquiry through symbols." Defining it more precisely than as "appraising the

warrants for assent in any symbolic exchange," Booth discusses each operative term in the definition. In this context once again he does not explore how to enlarge this capacity in students, but he does argue that the art of inquiry is the appropriate universal basis of education for good citizenship, good scholarship, good academic professionalism, and the good life.

Good scholarship and academic professionalism in particular are the subject of the book's last chapter, "The Idea of a University—as Seen by a Rhetorician" (1987), which is addressed to "all who care about the survival of institutions that preserve teaching and learning" (1987). What concerns Booth here is the means of reasoning by which we judge each other's work when we cannot possibly share each other's disciplinary—or even subdisciplinary—languages. Again the topic is "rhetoric A" (in this chapter called rhetoric-3), which Booth defends for the most part in terms laid down by Michael Polanyi and Rom Harré. It is a matter, Booth says, of "indeterminately large networks of critical trust" and "the topics common to all rational discourse." All of this, together with a potential or ideal "rhetorology"—"the *intertranslation* of rhetorics"—should in Booth's view form the core of a "university" education.

It is a noble goal. But this reviewer felt that the argument supporting it is somewhat dated. At the risk of revealing myself as one of the "morons" who, Booth says genially, tend to review his books, it seems to me worthwhile pointing out that his understanding of the nature and goals of American higher education is a comfortably traditional, foundational one confined to the likes of a University of Chicago campus, and hardly a street beyond. The book ranges not far from ideas that most academics were perfectly comfortable with a quarter-century ago when Booth delivered the earliest address compiled here. The challenge of feminism, post-colonialism, and multiculturalism, the needs of non- and semi-assimilated new Americans, the gradual attrition

of essentialist notions of selfhood—about such late twentieth-century concerns as these Booth has little to say.

Booth's understanding of rhetoric, furthermore, however vast and scholarly, is unadventurous. He seems only marginally acquainted with the implications that followers of Thomas Kuhn (not indexed in this book)—scholars such as Bloor, Geertz, Rorty, Latour, Knorr-Cetina, and Callon—have been teasing out of the thesis Kuhn enunciated thirty years ago: that knowledge is not the property of individuals but rather "intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all." Booth would of course acknowledge that when we speak or write we play the "language games" of the communities (or "networks of critical trust") that we and, we assume, our readers belong to and that constitute those communities, languages that are neither a private means of expression nor a transparent, objective medium of exchange, but community constructs.

What does not appear in the book for either acceptance or rejection is the proposition that maybe we do not read, write, listen, and speak primarily to persuade, inquire, or appraise warrants for assent. We may do so instead to gain acceptance by communities we don't yet belong to or to confirm and maintain our membership in the communities to which we already belong. Only in worrying informally about what he feels is an excessive tendency to "want to be loved" by colleagues and students alike does Booth begin to consider the possibility that his own goal in speaking and writing—perhaps in this book above all—may be to celebrate his own acculturation. The same goes for his great, curmudgeonly teachers, Crane and McKeon, whom Booth tenderly eulogizes. And it goes also, of course, for those who review Booth's books.

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