

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* by Wayne Booth

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REVIEWS

The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication by Wayne Booth. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 206 + xv pp.

October 15, 2004 was a good day for rhetoric. On that day Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, the country's leading "fake news" show, appeared as a guest on CNN's *Crossfire* to plead with the show's liberal and conservative hosts, Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson, to "stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America."¹ In making a case for "real debate" as opposed to the "theater" of *Crossfire*, Stewart insisted that the hosts "have a responsibility to public discourse" and mused that calling *Crossfire* a real debate show is like saying "pro wrestling is about athletic competition." And while Stewart only used the word rhetoric once in a joke,² he nonetheless launched an explicit, public, and subsequently widely disseminated argument (via internet streams and video downloads) for the value of what we rhetoricians would call rhetoric.

What Stewart argued for—and the funny yet direct way he argued for it—is rhetoric in its sense of public deliberation, as rhetoric gets studied and taught in many English and Speech departments. Stewart wishes the media, especially cable television shows like *Crossfire* and MSNBC's *Hardball*, shows that Stewart suggests could be renamed "I'm Going to Kick Your Ass," could assume a prominent place as a political forum, as a venue for productive rhetorical exchange rather than a staged shouting match. On October 15, despite the barrage of interruptions from Carlson and Begala, Stewart made such a strong case, and made it so stridently, with imperatives so starkly explicit, that had it been written down, Stewart's case could easily be issued as a manifesto for rhetoric.³

Yet back in October, such a manifesto was already in press. Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, much like Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance, has broad appeal, addressed as it is, "to all readers who care about misunderstanding and the skills required to achieve understanding" (xv). And much like Stewart's argument, Booth's is a particularly timely one. The notion that our nation is in need of rhetorical education now more than ever stems not just from a vague notion of producing "good citizens." Rather in 2005 the need for rhetorical education is, like Stewart's charge against ass kicking "debate," predicated upon harmfulness. If, as Booth writes in the conclusion, "our survival, now that mass destruction threatens, depends on the rhetoric of our leaders and our responses to them" (171) then, as he writes in the introduction, "we are in desperate need of serious rhetorical study, everywhere" (ix). And he means everywhere. Rhetorical education must not be confined to classrooms. Though in some instances it may start there, it must ooze out into everyday

lives. *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, insofar as it functions as a broad (and urgent) introduction to rhetoric for the lay reader, begins to heed its own call.

So, the RSQ reader might think, Booth is addressing my students and people outside the academy, not me. Well, not exactly. Even as Booth makes accessible a whole set of conflicting definitions, traditions, and knotty problems raised by the concept of rhetoric, he also offers new terminology along the way. One neologism that might catch on is Booth's use of the word "rhetrickery" (having heard Booth use this term in his address to the first Alliance of Rhetoric Societies meeting, I should say that the syllable "trick" should be emphatically pronounced, and if possible, the same syllable should be accompanied by a raised index finger). Rhetrickery, in Booth's definition, marks "the whole range of shoddy, dishonest communicative arts producing misunderstanding—along with other harmful results. The arts of making the worse seem the better cause" (11).

It's worth pointing out that this definition of rhetrickery is representative of the book's no-holds-barred tone. Like Stewart, Booth does not hesitate to slot certain rhetorical activity as "bad" or "harmful," nor does he sidle around the claim that we are in a moment of rhetorical crisis, and as with Plato's famed *pharmakon*, rhetoric is both cause and cure. Booth emphatically owns what he calls the book's "aggressive universality," an unabashed hope for the possibility rhetoric holds for saving "well, certainly not all of us, but many of us in many corners of the world" (172). Such hopes accompany and temper the strong worries Booth voices, especially in regards to education, politics, and the media, three central loci of his concerns (treated in chapters five, six, and seven, respectively). While Booth's fears about education, politics, and the media are certainly intensified by his honest and unqualified prose, the concerns are folded into a simple imperative: now is the time for moving serious rhetorical study beyond its current "confinement to a tiny garden in a far corner of our academic and public world" (viii-ix). In this way Booth manages to appeal to a broad readership as well as specialists, and perhaps for the same reasons that some of Jon Stewart's devout followers are rhetoricians or their kin.⁴

Those specialists might also be interested in other arguments made in the book. For example, early on in the book, Booth offers a new definition of rhetoric. For him, rhetoric is "*the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another: effects ethical (including everything about character), practical (including political), emotional (including aesthetic) and intellectual (including every academic field)*" (xi). This definition cites the most contemporary elements of Aristotle's definition of rhetoric (think "available means") by tacitly invoking much of the newer work in rhetorical studies, especially work in visual rhetoric and rhetoric of new media. Earlier in Booth's discussion of rhetoric it is clear that the range

of resources can just as easily be faces and bodies—"Are you not," Booth asks, "seeking rhetorical effect when you either smile or scowl or shout back at someone who has just insulted you?" So it is a definition that doesn't worry about disciplinary purchase on "the word," "the image," or even "the body," but rather sees words, images, and bodies as all part of the rhetorical enterprise. Also noteworthy in Booth's definition is the absence of the word persuasion, which has frequently served to narrow the province of rhetorical studies. When Jon Stewart called Tucker Carlson a dick, for example, he probably was not trying to persuade Carlson that he in fact falls into the category covered by such an epithet. Instead, he was, in Booth's sense, producing multiple effects—one of which, of course, was the widest possible dissemination of the video clip itself. With this new definition, though, Booth, whose *Rhetoric of Fiction* trained our eyes on rhetorical effects in the context of literature, uses his new book to keep our eyes trained on those effects, this time in the broadest possible context of everyday life.⁵ Finally, a deeper reading of the book suggests that Booth's new definition of rhetoric figures rhetoric as response. Booth writes of the need for "skillful" and "ethical" responses to political "rhetrickery" (128). As a result, the definition radiates outward, illuminating his arguments for the urgency of rhetorical education.

Also of interest to specialists in rhetoric will be the book's potential use as both a teaching tool and a tool for teaching teachers. Booth's first chapter, "How Many Rhetorics?" is accessible and thorough enough to spark discussions about all the ways the word rhetoric has circulated. Here Booth includes thirteen definitions in all—ranging from Aristotle and Cicero to Derrida and Lunsford—and even includes a discussion of rhetoric's various disciplinary affiliations. The history offered in chapter two ("A Condensed History of Rhetorical Studies") first offers a long view of the historical moments rhetoric has "flowered," followed by a list and brief description of the "forces that wiped out official rhetorical studies," such as scientism, secularist humanism, and reductionism (30-31). This quick account of rhetoric's dirty history will certainly create or feed interest in the notion of rhetoric among those new to the field, and it will also likely contribute to ongoing debates among specialists.

Perhaps most usefully, however, the book offers a repertoire of rhetorical suggestions, topoi for the specific topic of rhetoric (hence the Aristotelian force of the title—it is a *Rhetoric of Rhetoric* for rhetoricians). What Booth has given us, in other words, is a book of arguments about our own field—some that circulate regularly and seem familiar, as well as others that are formulated here anew. And if such arguments come bolstered with the ethical force of someone as highly regarded as Wayne Booth, then all the better.

In sum, not only will rhetoricians want to read this book and use it in our classes, we might want to buy several copies as holiday gifts, especially for

those friends and relatives who constantly ask “what is rhetoric, anyway?” (or worse, those who, like some of mine, have given up). We might do well to keep an extra copy in our office desk drawers in order to easily consult Part II, “The Need for Rhetorical Studies today,” especially chapter 5, “The Fate of Rhetoric in Education,” before meeting with administrators about developing (or growing, or salvaging) an undergraduate rhetoric major. And when we’re feeling institutionally or intellectually lonely, we might want to consult chapter 4, “Some Major Rescuers,” in which Booth “celebrates a small selection from the host of thinkers, mainly in the twentieth century, who have labored to rescue the study of rhetorical issues and methods” (55). Here we’ll find allies familiar (Kenneth Burke, Michael Polanyi, J.L. Austin, William James, and John Dewey) and surprising (the biologist Ernst Mayr, geneticists James Watson and Francis Crick and [gasp!] Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics).

If we’re really smart, though, in addition to buying and consulting Booth’s manifesto regularly, we might want to convince Jon Stewart to invite Wayne Booth to be his guest on *The Daily Show*, because the two, as it turns out, have a lot to talk about. And the nation might well be ready to listen.

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Notes

1. Almost immediately, this particular episode became available to download at more than 1,100 blogs and websites. According to ifilm, a major distributor of the 13-minute video clip online, the number of downloads of the clip exceeded a whopping 1.5 million by election day (CNN sets the television viewers of this particular episode at 867,000). One website featuring a video stream as well as the transcript of the entire exchange is <http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/bljonstewartcrossfire.htm>
2. From the Crossfire transcript, Stewart speaking:

You know, it was interesting.
President Bush was saying, John Kerry’s rhetoric doesn’t match his record.
But I’ve heard President Bush describe his record. His record doesn’t match his record.
3. For this insight about stylistic and generic features of a manifesto, I want to credit Janet Lyon’s brilliant historical—and deeply rhetorical—analysis of manifestoes.
4. While this particular observation remains at the level of personal anecdote for the most part, I would also point readers to Jim Aune’s rhetoric blogs at “Blogora,” especially those from election night 2004. In particular, the blog

entry (11/02/2004) entitled “Hedging my Bets”: “I’m watching NBC in the living room, and my wife Miriam is watching *The Daily Show* in the bedroom, laughing maniacally every few minutes.” Another of Aune’s entries “Mediated rhetoricians on election night” offers the playful query, “WHERE ARE ALL THE RHETORICIANS?????” <http://rsa.cwrl.utexas.edu/>

5. And with this move, Booth joins a host of rhetoric scholars urging us all *Toward a Rhetoric of Everyday Life*, the title of a recent collection edited by Martin Nystrand and John Duffy.

Works Cited

- Booth, Wayne. *A Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Lyon, Janet. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Nystrand, Martin, and John Duffy, eds. *The Rhetoric of Everyday Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.