Teaching the Topics: Character, Rhetoric, and Liberal Education

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*Betwixt genius and diligence there is very little room left for art.*

*CICERO, DE ORATORE, 2.35*

**TOWARD A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY**

Consider how, at first glance (and for some time thereafter), Wayne Booth impresses one not so much as a single Booth than as a complex field of Booths: teacher, dean, member of university and national seminars-colloquia-committees uncountable, MLA president, visiting lecturer, author of works on fiction, criticism, film, education, irony, rhetoric, ethics, religion, teaching. . . . In a recent address Booth calls himself a rhetorician, and in a recent book a generalist: a closer look will reveal to the initiate that for Booth these mean the same thing, but a set of questions will have occurred to the longtime Booth reader well before this: Is there a center to this widening (or at least fluctuating) gyre, is there some doctrine, activity, character, that pulls these pursuits together? Is calling oneself a generalist only an unsuccessful dodge of the more obviously demeaning label “dilettante” (however brilliant this

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dilettantism may be)? Or is there a unified field theory to account for these many Wayne Booths?

Such a unified center does exist, I believe, though my aim in this chapter is not personal praise. Instead, I am interested in arguing that Booth’s version of rhetorical generalism is relevant to understanding—Booth, to be sure; in my view an essential perspective on Booth—but, more importantly, to understanding the very enterprise of rhetoric itself, as a dynamic, changing basis for liberal education—an education precisely to a specific, coherent, intellectual and moral character.\(^2\) Booth has never been content with whatever ethical order or identity he may have managed for himself (as real-life author or act-er) over forty-odd years of multiform activity. Explicitly in most of his writings, more or less implicitly in the rest, Booth has not only written about rhetorical education, he has urged it on his readers (and exemplified it in doing so) as an ideal that will organize us—both our own individual characters, and the collective character of the communities we share. My question about Booth, then, is at the same time a question about the unity of rhetoric, ethics, and education: Just what is the unified activity of a rhetorician (qua generalist) such that we should attempt to fashion ourselves, our communities, and this very fashioning itself, in accord with it? My emphasis, it will be clear, is not on Booth the man or “Booth” the implied author, much less on anything like a real “theory” (certainly as metaphorical a concept here as “center” and “gyre”), but on the rhetorical activity of educating to a “rhetoric” that can be named and identified and studied in performance, but not frozen in historical time or place.

An inquiry that would begin to do justice to these themes would range further and penetrate deeper than the limits of this chapter allow, but within these limits I seek to offer some insights into these related matters. My thesis is simple but works on two levels: first, character, rhetoric, and the cultivation of these in liberal education constitute the very center of Booth’s concerns—both the subject of his writings, and the activity exemplified in those writings and in his other activities—and I am concerned on this level with the coherence of the two together. Second, and more broadly, I believe that we can all gain a coherent and compelling view of what liberal education should be, precisely through an understanding of what a rhetorical character should be. I might set up my argument more clearly by dispatching (if not disproving) a few common misconceptions.

First, as Aristotle (and the subsequent tradition in which the likes of Cicero, Vico, Newman, and Booth stand) makes clear, rhetoric is
not a principled inquiry into a determinate subject matter, but rather a "faculty" or "power" or (loosely, as in Cicero) an "art" or method. This power or method in turn, however, is to be equated with neither those interminable, barren lists of tropes, or commonplaces, or rules, or argument-types, that rhetoricians have regularly accumulated in the past, nor again with those "good reasons" or "warrantable assents" that theorists (like Booth, partly following Dewey) have rightly championed against various positivisms in our own time. Booth's stress on "good reasons" has been right, no doubt, given the dogmas he was trying to remove, but throughout his works implicitly, and explicitly in *The Vocation of a Teacher* (1988), Booth reminds us that rhetoric involves not only proof or judgment, but discovery or *inventio*. In diverting our attention from judgment to invention, I am suggesting that earlier campaigns in the rhetoric war, particularly those fought to establish the nonfoundationalist nature of reason (excellently chronicled by Richard Bernstein, among others¹), are now widely seen to have been successful. On the other hand, we have not yet begun to fight for the changes in education our earlier gains require if they are not to be wasted. More than twenty-five years ago, in "The Revival of Rhetoric" (1965), Booth had observed (not entirely tongue-in-cheek): "I find it interesting . . . that with all our modern passion for inventing new studies with proper labels we do not even have words in our language for the sciences of invention and arrangement. . . . [S]urely it is time for someone to make himself a professor of inventionics or arrangementistics . . ." (42). For Booth, as for Aristotle and Cicero, rhetoric involves inquiry as well as proof; and for Booth and Cicero, Vico and Vives, Newman, Kierkegaard, and Kenneth Burke, rhetoric comprises the building of character, community, and truth by cultivating the ability to discover warrantable assents in all areas of knowledge (or, across the curriculum), because all knowledge is more or less rhetorical, more or less bound up with the interests, values, beliefs, expectations, and the like of inquirers.

From this perspective, secondly, we can conceive of liberal education, after Booth himself, not so much in the first instance as a doctrine, a "knowledge most worth having," than as a method, a knowing most worth *doing*, that shares with rhetoric three characteristics: first, it concerns all areas of knowledge, not a single determinate subject matter; second, it is mediated (in varying degrees) by the "whole person"; and third, it involves a critical inquiry or invention not reducible to algorithmic methods—it involves a rhetorical power of discovering, as Booth says, what really warrants our assent (not only within a stable frame-
work of truths, as in Aristotle, but also among competing frameworks or paradigms). To be sure, this view of liberal education as rhetorical is not unique to Booth, nor is it free of tension with several contrary currents in his thought. Still, it is a view in eclipse in recent discussions of liberal education, though there are stirrings on the right and the left respecting rhetoric and education. But it has been little observed and less remarked that Booth illuminates this matter in rich detail in both his discussion and his critical practice, and for the remainder of this chapter I pursue his type of rhetoric of liberal education, in part by reference to his works, but first by picking up a discussion among rhetoricians over what I take to be the heart of rhetorical invention (and thus liberal education): the role of rhetorical topics (topoi) in teaching and inquiry.

PLACING THE TOPICS

The history of the topics is notoriously slippery (as is well known, the term has a dozen or more meanings and applications) but we might try to simplify: topics are "places" the rhetor turns to—or, less metaphorically, ideas, terms, formulas, phrases, propositions, argument forms, and so on that the rhetor turns to—to discover what to say on a given matter. Topics as determinate formulas of one sort or another, what Bacon called "promptuary devices" and others "commonplaces," ranging from a memorized word or line to entire prefabricated passages, are of no concern here since they are peculiarly nonrhetorical (fixed and determinate when the supposition of rhetoric is the opposite). What is of interest are those topics that are more or less indeterminate verbal resources useful for discovering (or "inventing") what is relevant, arguable, persuasive in a given case (let us call them invitational topics). The invitational topics belong to rhetoric as an intellectual faculty oriented to "action" (to practical effect, to nonexpert audiences or expert audiences considering nonexpert aspects of their expertise, and to the "practical" generally), and to "indeterminacy" (the concrete and contingent nature of rhetorical issues). But how, more specifically, are topics to function, and how is the teaching of topics to proceed? To answer these questions we need to do two things: first, by an act of (topical) "placement," in Kenneth Burke's terms, we need to identify how topics have been understood historically; and secondly, by a further act of placement, we need to turn to specific examples (the exemplary work of Wayne Booth), to the application of an otherwise abstract knowledge of rhetoric, to ap-
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precipitate that only such concrete knowledge of topics can provide what has long been understood to be genuine liberal education.

The most comprehensive schema in the literature on topics distinguishes between material and formal, that is, topics that express or generate substantive issues and warrants of various sorts, and those that provide only the “forms” of arguments. Aristotle is a case in point (Cicero, Quintilian, and later theorists would do as well): the twenty-eight inferential “forms” (the topoi enthymematon) listed in Book II of the Rhetoric, arguments from definition, cause, sign, similarity, circumstance, and so on (which have never ceased to reappear in one guise or another in textbooks on composition, speech, rhetoric, and criticism) are formal topics. Material topics (in Aristotle at least) are of two types: the koìna or “the commons” applicable to all subjects (more/less, possible/impossible, past/future fact, and the premises that derive from these headings); and the eide or “special topics” belonging to specific substantive areas. To be sure, the distinction between material and formal topics is relative: formal topics seek to help generate material but are themselves empty, and material topics naturally have some formal dimension to them, inferential or otherwise, though their utility is substantive, not formal.

Of the material topics there are several types or forms that can be found in Aristotle, Cicero, and other theorists: in particular, special topics (though common also) can be (1) general substantive headings or categories of knowledge (in Cicero “act” and “person,” or again the utile and honestas; in Aristotle “ways and means,” “imports and exports,” “motives,” “laws”); or substantive concepts (and groups of concepts), or indeed verbal structures of any sort (a law case, a character in a narrative, a narrative itself, an image), whose meaning is to be (re-)negotiated in a given case; (2) propositions used as major premises in arguments (vid. Rhetoric, Book I, 5–15); and (3) background information—assumptions, truths, and so on—that the rhetor can use to generate arguments of various sorts based on such information (e.g., Aristotle’s analyses of the emotions in Rhetoric, Book II). With respect to the greater importance of special as compared to common topics, John Henry Newman observed, “To say nothing else, common-places are but blunt weapons, whereas it is particular topics that penetrate and reach their marks” (338). And Bacon was equally impressed by the special topoi: “...topics are of two sorts, general and special. The general we have spoken to; but the particular hath been touched by some, but rejected generally as inartificial and variable. But ... I do receive particular topics, (that is,
places or directions of invention and inquiry in every particular knowledge,) as things of great use, being mixtures of logic with the matter of sciences..." (129, emphasis added). (But this acceptance by Bacon of the special topics is historically untypical.)

Finally, all such categories, concepts, propositions, and information can be explicit or implicit in a given text.

Something like this scheme covers the rhetorical topics, so that we are in a position to inquire more closely into how topics are to function realistically in teaching, inquiry, and criticism. We know how they typically have functioned. Some years ago Professor Carolyn Miller expressed consternation over what she argued has been the repeated loss of the special topics in the teaching of rhetoric (she meant, I believe, all material topics, common or special, but particularly the special topics), and the habitual turn to the formal or "inferential" topics. Miller rightly saw that the history of rhetorical pedagogy and theory has favored inferential or formal topics, in great part because, unlike material topics, formal topics can be easily itemized, circumscribed, and transmitted, as Bacon himself had observed, "But leaving the humour which hath reigned too much in the schools, which is, to be fairly subtle in a few things which are within their command, and to reject the rest" (129).

As Miller writes: "...the inferential perspective is clearly advantageous to the teacher—it provides convenience, coherence, and limitations; it permits isolation [from the topics' original context] and elaboration. The materialist perspective, in contrast, emphasizes the diversity and complexity of rhetorical practice" (65). In other words, what we gain in the turn from material topics to formal topics is a (sometimes dubious) systematic coherence at the risk of forfeiting reality and informed judgment.

Miller's response to this problem, with which I concur, is to call for the rejuvenation of the special (material) topics, those drawn from specific areas or disciplines, in rhetorical study and education, and she proceeds to offer a triad of topical headings as a new typology for special topics. Her typology is perfectly reasonable, but it could, one imagines, easily degenerate into the rhetorician's characteristic move toward systemizing that she rightly fears. The problem here is that we cannot really rejuvenate the material topics unless we appreciate the goal of rhetorical education; too often in the past the use and teaching of topics have been cut off from what rhetoric might practically be and what organizational structure our knowledge and teaching might plausibly take. In fact I think it quite probable that the very "places" where rheto-
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The task, then, is not to dismiss rhetorical history or theory, but to read both in the light of present (and past) realities of rhetorical practice, the structure and aims of liberal education, and the practice of teaching. That practical turn in my title—teaching the topics—may appear to some to threaten to make elementary (to juvenilize) this aspect of the philosophy and theory of rhetoric, rather in the way Miller has rightly argued it has in the past, but my argument here is that this need not occur. In the thought and practice of Wayne Booth, I believe, we find a model of practical sensitivity to the special topics often lacking in “general” rhetorics, and it is to this thought and practice, now itself understood as a material or “special” rhetoric, that I wish to turn.

REINVENTING THE MATERIAL TOPICS

From the beginning of his career, Booth has ventured characterizations and definitions of rhetoric, which we might simply summarize thus: rhetoric is the faculty and art of producing and appraising what really warrants our assent. This is simple enough, though far reaching in its scope and depth. It is grounded on the premise that all knowledge is mediated in some degree by the “horizons” or “paradigms” or “fiduciary frameworks” in which we necessarily move and have our being. Of course, some problems are more determinate than others, but, when we face those problems we agree can or should be treated more or less “objectively,” as recurrences susceptible to determinate methods, our initial recognition that such problems need to be so treated (given our purposes) depends on our ability to encounter them first as indeterminacies, within contexts that admit of more and less, possible and impossible—that is, within rhetorical contexts of interpretation, emphasis, valuing. A datum or problem can only first be recognized as amenable to more
or less determinate or “objective” treatment against the full range of possibilities as to its existence and meaning, and this requires its interpretation by the “whole person” using the full range of his or her powers and resources—cognitive, emotional, ethical, and so on.

Moreover, the more our questions about a problem implicate our total ways of life, the more rhetoric is involved. And when the whole of life and knowledge becomes the object of our inquiry, as it does in all accounts of liberal education, rhetoric is maximally involved; indeed, the challenge of education is just that of producing a “whole” person—and, by extension, a university (not a multiversity), a community, a culture (the diversity intrinsic to such “wholes” notwithstanding). On this view, liberal education is the cultivation of our ability to discriminate what is indeterminate, to produce warrants for assent, and to appraise those warrants and the warrants offered to us by others.

The way we achieve such cultivation, Booth has said explicitly and repeatedly, is “to find new topics, new shared places from which any given rhetorical community can move, trusting to various degrees of warranting in the search for liveable truths, not certainties” (Vocation 126); also, “In the ancient terminology of rhetoricians, we seek to discover the topics, the topoi, the places or locations on which, or in which, a shared inquiry can take place” (Vocation 108). Such topics are not abstract lists of inferential forms to be memorized; they are rather substantive resources for inquiry into the concrete. But what is meant here by topics, how can they be taught, and how exactly will they function such that we shall indeed cultivate abilities of discrimination and judgment, and not merely replicate commonplaces and diffuse all sense of unity and structure?

In one of his footnoted asides in Modern Dogma, Booth again has recourse to rhetoric and topics to explain what he is up to, although a little reflection will show that these remarks apply to all of his work: “Those who know classical rhetoric will be aware that I am experimenting with the old notion of the topoi, those . . . shared ‘standpoints’ where good arguments can be found because in them men did in fact discover warrantable beliefs” (1111118). Booth is right about his “experimenting” here, because the collection (as he calls it) of topoi that he offers us differs from traditional lists in at least two ways: first, Booth offers special topics, not vague common or formal topics, so that he ends up with no “list” at all but a “collection,” enormously wide ranging and therefore difficult to formalize; and second, the special topics he offers, while they include the standard value propositions and headings, include also any
and all verbal (and presumably nonverbal) artifacts capable of providing warrants for claims. Booth lists "stories as reasons," for example, "art as the changing of minds," and the first principles of specific disciplines, discussing many of the specific topics that come under such matters. Not since Cicero (or, not since Richard McKeon and Kenneth Burke) has anyone recommended so sweeping a topical philosophy. As Cicero has Crassus state it in De oratore, "the real power of eloquence is such, that it embraces the origin, the influence, the changes of all things in the world, all virtues, duties, and all nature, so far as it affects the manners, minds, and lives of mankind" (213).

The manners, minds, and lives of mankind: Cicero's qualification (such as it is) of the kind of knowledge rhetoric embraces points to just that indeterminacy of the real and the known central to Booth. But we must not misconceive how the rhetorician is to go about this virtual "knowing all things," as both Cicero and Booth urge. In the De oratore (2.39-40), Cicero explicitly adverts to the formal topics as useful devices for the rhetor, but it is equally clear that such topoi are easily memorized and applied, hence not central to his problem. What is of far greater concern to Cicero, as to Booth, is the orator's more or less systematic exposure to "all things." Cicero, it is true, does not call these complex and various matters topoi, but clearly they function as material, special topics—ideas, terms, distinctions, value propositions in all fields, literary works, histories, the civil law, "all antiquity" (1.35)—not as determinate and fixed facts and truths, but as more or less negotiable, interpretable possibilities for argument—"general principles" (2.17) used as places to argue on both sides of a question (1.34). This, I take it, is what Booth himself has in mind:

. . . what would happen if you probed and found what assumptions your own intellectual convictions really rest on, then tested them against other people's assumptions, and finally concluded with more or less confidence. . . .

The collection of topoi from which such principles come would have become an organon, always to some degree sifting and uncertain, but reliable in discovering not only what you yourself believe but what you should believe. . . .

Instead of making an a priori list of topics at a high level of generality, as those who revive classical rhetoric sometimes do, I shall pursue the consequences of this notion [of special topics] inductively. . . . (Modern Dogma 111n18)
This inductive turn to special topics is what makes Cicero’s and Booth’s approaches to rhetorical invention in all of their works mature ones. In the abstract, topics lose touch with what gives them purpose; to approach topics inductively—by examples, by entering concrete cases—renders rhetoric realistically complex, demanding, and sophisticated.\(^\text{12}\)

Admonished myself here to practice what is preached, I propose to examine a quite simple yet telling example of Booth’s own topical theory and practice, as a way of making my argument more concrete.

In the first chapter of *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Booth attempts (among other things) simply to locate his subject matter (note that for Booth this is preeminently a rhetorical task, as “irony” is understood to be, not fixed and given, but a contestable and negotiable concept, properly approached by way of rhetorical topics). He then explains how one type of irony (stable irony) is recognized, and subsumes the interpretation of irony under the rubric “knowledge,” all the while urging quietly that irony is particularly worthy of such pains as he is taking, distinguishing it from puns, allegory and fable, satire, and so on.

But note what happens next, in the beginning of chapter 2. Aware of the limits of abstract explanation, our rhetorician has recourse to a metaphor to illuminate the interpretation of irony—one trope to clarify another. Stable irony, Booth says, entails a “reconstruction” of our beliefs and values, our “dwelling places,” one in which we experience a move or climb to a new level of understanding (33–37). Now, when I say that Booth turns to the metaphor of building (or rebuilding) to clarify or illuminate irony, I really have in mind a far more complex rhetorical transaction (or reconstruction) than might otherwise be noted. Consider the following:

1. Along with his argument and claims about irony in chapter 1, Booth’s metaphor of reconstruction directs attention to facts about irony and its interpretation, its use by speakers to transform their audiences, which together are intended to qualify irony as a source of knowledge. Now, this is itself the use of rhetorical argument (in part by way of metaphor) to reconstitute what had been considered a mere trope and turn it into a topic, a source of arguments. (And characteristically, Booth himself is explicit about this linkage with topics; see p. 34).

2. The metaphor, moreover, requires on the reader’s part a reconstruction of meaning similar to the interpretation of any stable irony. Said otherwise, here the metaphor too is not only a trope but a topic. Like stable irony, it engages and reconstitutes both the meaning of
metaphor and of irony, as well as the audience taking it in. Like irony, it requires that we “dwell” in its implications about dwelling, inhabiting “places” that we find livable or not, comfortable or not, true or not, so that if we come to accept this place as acceptable, our world (and its inhabitants) is reconstructed as a place where irony and metaphor do in fact reconstruct.  

3. The grasp and appreciation of the metaphor involves (at least in principle) all the “powers and resources” the reader-as-generalist has at hand. That is, only if the reader can actively imagine houses or other dwellings, has a sense for private rooms and public rooms and the values they imply, knows something (but not necessarily much) about interior wall frames and exterior sheet-rock, about foundations and so on—only then can the reader follow Booth in what he makes of his metaphor. We cannot grasp the arguments and claims the metaphor suggests without implicitly relying on a range of beliefs, values, and experiences; such an ability (even if not deeply called into play by any given metaphor) requires just that broad “universal” knowledge of the “manners, minds, and lives of mankind” that Cicero promoted. Like irony, our rhetorician’s metaphor invites discrimination and judgment.  

4. The metaphor of reconstruction points back to the “four steps” of reconstructing ironic meaning that Booth outlines in chapter 1. Together, the discursive “steps,” along with the metaphor, exemplify how material topics (i.e., the steps and the metaphor themselves) function as both list and skill: alone, the list of the four steps of interpretation could easily become abstract and mechanical; made concrete in the metaphor and in subsequent examples, the topics activate interpretive skills that a list alone cannot touch.  

5. The metaphor is intended to persuade in an extended sense of the word (extended in the way that irony-as-topos extends the classical sense of topos): like irony, it initiates an intellectual dance whose truth-values are proved (or disproved) in the dancing. Such a “dance” for Booth is community oriented in the way persuasion often is not.  

6. Irony as reconstruction also seeks community. The point of Booth’s reconstituting it as topos is partly to indicate how irony creates a complex dwelling-together not appreciated before. Thus the rhetorician finds new common ground.  

It would not be in the least difficult to apply these six lessons to any other of Booth’s works. The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) (to cite but one), notwithstanding its concession to the mimetic–didactic dichotomy, re-
constituted the *topos* of fiction itself as the rhetorical practice of an implied author seeking to shape the response of implied readers. More rhetorically still (to cite another), *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1989) is also a "rhetoric," this time of fiction's ability to reconstitute ethically (and politically) both character and community—themes only implicit in the *Rhetoric of Fiction*. Indeed, in many ways *Company* summarizes Booth's conception of rhetorical education: reading any sort of narrative (reading anything) requires that we draw on and make more or less subtle and comprehensive connections among values, ideas, emotions, beliefs, historical contexts, historical and other kinds of narrative, and so on, in order to cultivate our ability to know. This is quite along the lines of what MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and Charles Taylor call for in ethics, and what Gerald Graff, in *Professing Literature*, calls for in the contemporary teaching of English (and, presumably, all liberal studies): in Cicero's language, the placing of the "origin, the influence, the changes of all things in the world, all virtues, duties, and all nature" as these are manifested in literature, in the context of the "manners, minds, and lives of mankind."

To take this a step further, Graff also recommends a more honest airing of our interpretive disputes and the conflicts among interpretive modes, and here too Booth's *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (1979) uses rhetoric to adjudicate paradigm disputes among critics. That is, while adhering to rhetoric, the rhetorician above all will be sensitive to different and even opposing critical paradigms precisely by recognizing how they cultivate the lives of mankind. Unable to fit them all under a monistic critical umbrella, Booth does not forswear the goal of "truth," as is sometimes claimed, but operationally maximizes the rhetorical community of criticism, redefining it as a place not for aimless killing but for inquiry (under controlled conditions) for as inductively adequate a community of inquirers as we can get. Here theoretical incommensurability of paradigms is subordinated to a practical (and analogical) compatibility built on open-ended, indeed topical, criteria of adequacy: univocity of statements about truth in criticism takes second place to the critical inquiry about such statements.

**POLYTOPIA**

It might be useful to summarize Booth's approach to material topics. First, topics involve a holistic thought of various sorts—the unity of
the knower as a "whole person," of the knower and the known, and of the known as a universe (or pluri-verse whose unity we know, however, only asymptotically). For Booth, topical rhetorical thought is connective and comprehensive, as in Cicero, such that all specialist advancement of learning is controlled by an equally indispensable generalist comprehension of what is learned.

Second, such generalism need not contradict (though it will almost certainly exist in tension with) specialization, because specialization both presupposes generalism—topical connectiveness—and is also able to make use of generalism itself. This point can be made clearer by considering in some detail one of Booth's most succinct treatments of this question.

In his Ryerson Lecture for 1987 presented to the University of Chicago, entitled (significantly) "The Idea of a University as Seen by a Rhetorician" (1987) (rpt. in Vocation 309-34), Booth asks how those in institutions of higher learning, threatened on all sides as they are by forces of specialization and departmentalization, manage to communicate with each other, formulate and undertake common enterprises, discuss their activities, conduct the business of the place—hiring and firing and promoting and planning—in short, how they manage to be a university rather than a multiversity. This is, of course, much the same question, in different guise, that Booth asks in Critical Understanding: how do/can critics of radically different stripes talk to each other in a common enterprise of criticism? It is also the question (the same special topic) with which I began, namely, what identity, what integrated self, does so diverse a generalist as Booth offer us?

Booth sketches out in this lecture a characteristically rhetorical response to this problem facing the university, when he locates three overlapping sets of special topoi by means of which the members of a university community earn their unity and get their collective work done. First, there are those shared facts and assumptions within a given field of expertise by means of which specialists talk to each other about their field and their individual work. Second, the members of a university community (or of any community, for that matter) share many values, beliefs, expectations, experiences, and so on that they can call on to assess character, in hiring and firing for example, or to judge actions. And third, there are those not-quite-so-general values and beliefs of the academic community in particular, about whether another academic sounds intelligent, has mastered the tricks of the trade, argues well, and so on. Quoting Polanyi, Booth asserts that all of us live in complex and overlapping fiduciary structures or webs of beliefs of the kind just men-
tioned, and that is how we get our work done, through a rhetorical or topical invention that seeks “good reasons” for assent.

To rhetoricians at least this is perhaps obvious enough regarding how the university gets its more quotidian business accomplished. But Booth goes further and suggests that it is also by locating rhetorical topoi that specialists within the disciplines can themselves make connections within and among (not just outside of) their disparate specialties, specialties of which no single individual can hope to master even one, let alone six or a dozen or a score. Note that Booth’s suggestion about the centrality of topical generalism is consonant with their being specializations and specialists: himself a specialist speaking in this address as a generalist to a group of specialists, it is not surprising that Booth directs his discussion here to how specialists as such can contribute to the making of community through topics. But note also that topical inventiveness is a power, and a kind of character, that belongs first to the rhetorician-as-generalist, and only secondarily to the specialist, who uses this power both to contact what is indeterminate in her field, as well as to make new connections with realities (and people) outside of the field. In other words, despite Booth’s rhetorical adaptation here to an audience of specialists, liberal education through the rhetorical arts of topical inquiry and persuasive proof privileges, not a specialist’s expertise, but the generalist’s orientation to all of reality, since such education concerns finding good reasons for beliefs in any field. Thus, to educate liberally is to enfranchise to the arts of invention and judgment across disciplines, with the aim of producing reasonable assents.

In a (again not entirely tongue-in-cheek) sketch of an ideal University of Polytopia, Booth explicitly situates what he calls rhetorical “curiosity,” this topical inventiveness within and across subject matter specialisms, at the very center, not only of liberal education, but even of the research university itself. The practice of the three rhetorics mentioned, and the study of these rhetorics, what Booth calls rhetorology, would promote a “polytopicality” that would stimulate original research, insure its communicability, and generate that orientation towards the whole of knowledge and of community that makes for a shared universe of value, aim, and action. Here there exists no split between the “two cultures,” or between specialism and generalism: the generalism to which one is habituated or enfranchised in the college of a university provides the basis for just that more focused inventiveness that the specialist himself needs and uses to seek novelty and to communicate to others. In the University of Polytopia, as Booth indicates
elsewhere, the work of the rhetorologist “is precisely to pursue the com­parative worth of different warrants in different persuasive enterprises, and to invent—or if you prefer, discover—improved ways for minds to meet within disciplines and among seemingly different or conflicting disciplines” (Vocation 126).  

To be sure, such a position is not without its dangers. In an article entitled “Modern Sophistic and the Unity of Rhetoric,” Michael C. Leff has argued that one of the dangers in imperializing rhetoric across the disciplines (in the way that Booth has done) is that we may miss the special kinds of rhetoric that the specialist sciences practice, if we only speak—in our quest for hunting out the “rhetoric of” these sciences—of rhetoric as a matter of civic discourse, that is, of talk directed to an uninitiated public. I should think, however, that Booth’s focus on the topics, including topics as first principles of subject matters, manages to avoid this danger, for it allows us to see that the constitution of “communities” is not bound by one model of community (or “public”), that the use of different sets of topoi allows us to create different types of community, specialized or generalized. By the same token, however, we can never lose the concept of community if we stay focused on topics, in the way that it has often been lost in our blind pursuit of specializations and individualisms among both humanists and scientists. Whether it is structuralists seeking a closed system of signs, or deconstructionists elevating the play of the trace, or physicists or sociologists pledging allegiance to something called scientific method, the topic as a locus of relatively indeterminate meanings, as a fluid, potential connection to other meanings, and as a first principle that can ground all further inquiry and appraisal, is the sort of device that, when inventively used, is able to conserve tradition while allowing for new connections to new meanings—and thus to new communities.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

If all discourse is more or less rhetorical, as Booth and others argue, then rhetorical topics are useful to specialists within a discipline, to specialists trying to link their disciplines with others, and to specialists and generalists linking disciplines with larger ethical, political, and other concerns. Booth’s contribution is to have argued, and exemplified in his own writings, that rhetorical topics are the means for building community within and among different specialties, and indeed that liberal
education is best when it trains its students to function first as generalists who can connect fields by constituting indeterminate issues within larger ethical, political, and other contexts, and then as specialists-quageneralists within fields who can create new areas for inquiry and proof. The character of the rhetorician, then, is first and foremost that of the generalist who learns to use the field-variant *topoi* of the different disciplines to achieve (always limited) views of the whole of an always shifting reality. Education to such a character means providing students with controlled opportunities to address indeterminate and ambiguous problems that require, from the student’s own changing and developing knowledge and experience, the deployment of ideas (topics) that promise to constitute an issue adequately, disclose its circumstances for apprehension and understanding, interpret its meanings, and assess its value and truth. For Booth, of course, it is the great texts of our tradition and indeed potentially of all traditions (whose canons are themselves always undergoing topical negotiation—Arnold’s “best that has been thought and said” understood topically rather than dogmatically) that most fully provide such opportunities.

To bring that about, how will the teaching of topics occur?

First, it should be clear by now that the “general rhetorics,” as they might be called, of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Hermogenes, Ramus, and the like, cannot teach special topics, which are, I have argued, the very stock-in-trade of the rhetorician’s (or rhetorologist’s) art. In fact, when it comes to topics (though not necessarily to other rhetorical matters—argument forms, style, genres of discourse, and the rest), it is doubtful that the term *art* applies in any very useful way at all, because special topics slip through such general categories, and their number and types preclude any helpful comments at so general a level. I believe this is what Aristotle had in mind in the lost *Gryllus*, where he is alleged to have said that rhetoric is not an art; or what Cicero himself had in mind when he had Antonius in the *De oratore* declare, “Betwixt genius and dilligence there is very little room left for art,” and when he prescribed broad liberal learning as the best training for the orator. It is what Quintilian meant when he referred to topics as more a *skill* than a list—a power or faculty of adapting to specific cases rather than any list to be memorized—and what Miller intended when she said that the special topics exist in an unstable relationship to the rest of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (64–65). It is what Booth is up to in *Modern Dogma* when he forswears an “a priori list of topics at a high level of generality,” and what he *does* in all of his writings, where he works out what ought to be called “special rhetorics” on a variety of problems.
This is not to suggest that we can or should dispose of lists of topics, or even lists of general topics. We ought not to stop teaching the general rhetorics of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and so on, nor try to imagine a composition teacher teaching invention, or a Wayne Booth writing a rhetoric of irony, without either one's having recourse to lists, schemas, grids, "steps of interpretation," and the like. The problem is not schemas per se, but our failure to recognize that rhetoric really lives only at the level of concrete examples, cases, problems—unstably, as it were, between pure theory and determinate fact. Learning rhetoric must be "inductive," and when it becomes so even the history of rhetorical theory will look quite different, focused as much (if not more) on special rhetorics in various fields. This turn to special rhetorics in the name of rhetorical generalism may appear paradoxical, but it rather underscores the entire point: the generalist herself needs specific matter to connect if she is to escape mere dilettantism (however brilliant).

Second, it is another of Booth's contributions to the contemporary discussion of rhetoric and liberal education to point out that much of what we do in the curriculum is already rhetorical, whether flown under the banner of Rhetoric or not: "You can see immediately that there are a lot of rhetorologists around, travelling under other names" (Vocation 125); also, "I hasten to add that it is an art that need not be taught under the title of 'rhetoric.' I cannot think of any course in which some contribution to its mastery could not be made . . ." (Vocation 117).

Yet the problem remains that the rhetorical nature of most courses goes unthematized, if not totally unrecognized, so that we need in the undergraduate curriculum at least both to recognize and to dwell on the negotiated nature of subject matters and their canons, and the means of such negotiation—material topics (and tropes), and persuasive warrants. In the rhetoric major itself (in those too few places where it exists), we need courses that thematize invention, whose goal it is to study inquiry and to cultivate the effectiveness of would-be inquirers. Such courses can take at least two forms: (1) courses that trace the history of negotiation of some special topic or network of topics (e.g., the growth of some concept in common law), focusing, as Gerald Graff and Thomas Sloane have recommended, on the rhetorical contest to view it in one way or another; and (2) courses that identify rhetorical "arts," what I have called special rhetorics operative in fields not obviously rhetorical—history, theology, philosophy, psychology, and so on—focusing on the articulation of topics and their use in specific cases. The Federalist Papers or The Constitution of the United States, Machiavelli's The Prince or More's Utopia, Bacon's or Johnson's essays, Buber's
I and Thou or Carl Rogers’s On Becoming a Person, Newman’s Tracts for the Times or Coleridge’s Aids to Reflection, Cicero’s De officiis or Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript—these and innumerable other works can be profitably approached as special “rhetorics” that require and develop inventional powers while they exhibit the indefinite range of rhetorical thought. As rhetoricians we must not be afraid to blur genres, as Geertz has put it, or to treat alike both “texts and lumps,” in Rorty’s phrase—or, as Booth has it, to “pursue the comparative worth of different warrants in different persuasive enterprises” (Vocation 126).

Lastly, lest the infinite range of special topics alluded to above threaten to create a crisis of coherence for the rhetorician, indeed an identity crisis of the sort that I earlier suggested seemed to threaten Wayne Booth, we need to bear in mind Booth’s own focus on “community.” It is true, as Booth allows, that there are innumerable communities, each as generalized or as specialized as the topoi that constitute them. But the ongoing struggle of the community of communities, the place of places that offers a topical center from which further rhetorical studies can radiate, is that ethical–political community, that company we keep, in which all human beings live and have their being. The topical study of “civil discourse” broadly conceived can provide that center where rhetoric itself is maximized, as Aristotle, Cicero, and the Renaissance humanists understood, and it can provide the common ground (of consensus as well as conflict) that can integrate liberal learning. Wayne Booth’s contribution to the study of such discourse has been to demonstrate in his own inquiries how special topics can be used to discover new meanings and to renovate traditional values.

Notes


2. It is not my intention to collapse ethics and rhetoric here, but to indicate that the phronimos is the rhetorical ideal. For pertinent works, see Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, trans. with introduction and notes by Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962); John Dewey and James H. Tufts, Ethics (New York: Henry Holt, 1908), esp. chs. 18 and 19; and Stanley Hauerwas, Character and the Christian Life (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1975), esp. ch. 2.


5. As Struever (15) has put these points, "rhetoric is not so much systematic in the philosophical sense as a mnemotechnical system for making fruitful connections between disparate insights, and the principle which governs its classification and analysis is accessibility. But accessibility here means relevance to particular human performances, not a congruence to a familiar but rigid ontological structure."


8. I might indicate at this point that my support of the material, and particularly the special, topics here is not intended to call into question all teaching of formal topics, or of special topics cast at a high level of generality, in courses in composition and speech. For a now somewhat dated overview of some of the literature on "heuristics," see David V. Harrington et al., "A Critical Survey of Resources for Teaching Rhetorical Invention: A Review Essay," *College English* 40 (1979): 641–61.


10. Thus it would be correct to say that the term for special topics disappeared in the rhetorics of Cicero and Quintilian, but it would be much mistaken to claim that the concept disappeared as well.

11. Thomas De Quincey adverts to this large scope of rhetoric in his essay "Rhetoric" (81): "There was a time when . . . it [rhetoric] designated the whole cycle of accomplishments [sic] which prepared a man for public affairs." For the context of debate—arguing *in utramque partem*, on both sides of a ques-


17. Thus Michael Leff has observed of "propriety," Cicero's linguistic counterpart to topical inventiveness: "We cannot disentangle propriety from its manifestations, and so it cannot be captured in theoretical abstractions. It can be apprehended only as embodied in a particular discourse. But that does not mean propriety is unteachable, for where one method of instruction fails, another succeeds. . . . *De Oratore* is neither a rhetorical textbook nor a philosophical treatise. It is an oration about the art of oratory, and it instructs by being what it cannot explain" ("Burke's Ciceronianism," 124). See also Leff, "Genre and Paradigm," 313: "The art [of rhetoric] is constituted by its performance, and its application can expand in unlimited and unpredictable ways as oratorical principles are transferred into new domains of practice. . . . Cicero was more concerned about the orator than the art of rhetoric, more interested in concrete practice than abstract precept, and more inclined to view oratory as the central force in civilized life than as one among a number of practical activities open to theoretical investigation."


19. See note 8 above.

**Bibliography**


