Booth, Bakhtin, and the Culture of Criticism

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In an essay in PMLA's centennial number, Geoffrey Hartman portrays the present "culture of criticism" as "within historicism, reacting to the expanded horizon of fact it has brought about, now integrating by an impossible embrace and now violently throwing off the burden of multiplying and fragmenting perspectives" (372). Hartman assumes in the essay the impossible task of integrating the diverse and self-divided culture he imagines, embracing the German, French, British, and American cultures of criticism, and sublimating the violence of the "knowledge explosion" within his own cosmopolitan cultivation of acquaintance with more than one hundred fifty scholars and critics from Aarsleff to Zumthor.

At one point in his argument, Hartman asks whether Bakhtin's dialogics can help criticism cope with its "burden of multiplying and fragmenting perspectives." Hartman thinks that Bakhtin's "dialogic principle" "exposes a constitutive unintelligibility" in both the modern novel and human relations, and he asks whether such a principle can sustain us without our resorting to other powerful structures of thought and discourse: "Can we tolerate such ambiguity, such unresolved diversity," he asks, "without structures of domination or dialectic?" (389). Hartman fears that we cannot, but his commitment to survey the whole present culture of criticism does not permit him to pause and consider the question. I take it up in this chapter as part of a longer inquiry that asks whether a deliberately cultivated dialogic criticism can stabilize and clarify our culture of criticism without giving in to the alternatives Hartman fears.
When Hartman recognizes "domination or dialectic" as alternative practices that threaten to undermine Bakhtin's dialogics, he draws upon powerful Western cultural paradigms. He calls to my mind, for example, the paradigm of political regimes in the eighth book of Plato's Republic. There the democratic regime is threatened from below by the temptation to escape from its unresolved diversities into the domination of the tyrant's single voice, the "sinister unifying" Hartman fears (389). But it is also threatened from above by the dialectical philosopher's push to transcend diversities and subordinate them in an ideal scale of forms. In terms more pertinent to my argument here, Hartman's alternatives also recall how easily we can slip from the relatively unfamiliar and un-rationalized practices of dialogic thought and discourse back into the familiar cultural tracks worn by the traditional verbal arts of rhetoric and dialectic.

Rhetoric, after all, may be understood as the great storehouse of verbal strategies for imposing "structures of domination." In one of its persistent forms, it teaches its practitioners how to shape their discourse to "win over others," whether the phrase implies persuading them or just plain beating them. Dialectic, I have argued elsewhere, cultivates techniques of manipulating ideas rather than people, teaching its practitioners to organize and overcome ideas without reference to the people who hold them. Because rhetoric resembles dialogics in its concern with the relations among people in a given community and dialectic resembles dialogics in its concern with the relations among ideas, the dialogic figure of the hyphenated person-idea, the ideologist-hero, easily reduces, without a well-known art of dialogics, to a rhetorical person struggling for domination or a dialectical idea contradicting, subsuming, or being subsumed by another idea. Dialogics is always breaking down into the rhetorical and dialectical arts that oppose it and each other.

But the issue is really more complicated than this dialectical formulation allows, because the arts brought forward under the names rhetoric and dialectic are not all of a piece, and the modes of opposition and cooperation among their advocates and the advocates of dialogics are not uniform. A dialogic survey of some of the many projects for criticism in recent years that have explicitly identified themselves with either rhetoric or dialectic would disclose friends, opponents, and even practitioners of dialogics flying the banners of both the other arts and calling on Bakhtinian dialogics to account for itself in a variety of terms. In this survey, neither domination nor dialectic would maintain a single identity as an alternative to dialogics, but each makes its appearance not only
among those who represented rhetoric and dialectic for Bakhtin but also among others who now represent these arts in Anglo-American criticism.

Domination is a significant motif for the writer who most often represents rhetoric in Bakhtin's writings, Victor Vinogradov, a contemporary of Bakhtin's and an influential figure in Soviet stylistics. Vinogradov, who views the novel as a rhetorical genre and analyzes its devices "from the point of view of their effectiveness as rhetoric" (Dialogic Imagination 42), helps to shape Bakhtin's zero-sum image of the art. Bakhtin writes in his late notebooks, "In rhetoric there is the unconditionally innocent and the unconditionally guilty; there is the complete victory and the destruction of the opponent. In dialogue the destruction of the opponent also destroys that very dialogic sphere in which the word lives" ("Extracts" 182). Such remarks about rhetoric take on dialogic force in the context of the continuing dialogue Nina Perlina documents between Bakhtin and Vinogradov. She writes,

Where Bakhtin states that any individual discourse act is internally a nonfinalized, open-ended rejoinder, Vinogradov demonstrates that even a real-life dialogue is built by a set of clear-cut monologic procedures. Where Bakhtin finds dialogic reaccentuation of another person's utterance, the hidden multivoicedness, or the polyphonic "word with the loop[hole]," Vinogradov discovers the speaker's attempt to muffle the voice of the opponent, to discredit his speech-manifestations, and to advance his own monologic pronouncement over the dialogic reply of another person. . . . Within the framework of Bakhtinian poetics, a speech-partner is the protagonist of the idea. Within the framework of Vinogradov's poetic system, a speech partner is the rhetorician whose main intention is to make his oratory the only effective and authoritative speech manifestation. For Bakhtin, the individual utterance is born between the speech partners, in the immediacy of discourse; for Vinogradov, a dialogic rejoinder is generated by and belongs to its absolute owner.

With Vinogradov in the background, Bakhtin associates rhetoric with "style determined by demands for comprehensibility and clarity—that is, precisely those aspects that are deprived of any internal dialogism, that take the listener for a person who passively understands but not for one who actively answers and reacts" (Dialogic Imagination-
As opposed to the seriocomic genres Bakhtin links with the dialogic, the classical rhetorical genres are one-sided, serious, rational, univocal, and dogmatic (Problems 107). Though rhetoric does represent the voices of others, rhetorical double-voicedness does “not extend to the dialogical essence of evolving language itself; it is not structured on authentic heteroglossia but on mere diversity of voices; in most cases the double-voicedness of rhetoric is abstract and thus lends itself to formal, purely logical analysis of the ideas that are parceled out in voices” or to polemically “erecting potential discourses for the accused or for the defense (just such free creation of likely, but never actually uttered words, sometimes whole speeches—‘as he must have said’ or ‘as he might have said’—was a device very widespread in ancient rhetoric)” (Dialogic Imagination 353-54).

Enter, at last, Wayne Booth, a frequent user of this device, probably the best-known rhetorical critic in the Anglo-American culture of criticism, and in his Rhetoric of Fiction the most significant American analog of Vinogradov in the recently renewed critical dialogue with Bakhtin. Just as Vinogradov strengthens Russian formalist poetics by accommodating the novel under the heading of rhetoric, so Booth strengthens Chicago Aristotelian formalist poetics by the same move. In his Aristotelian framework, Booth conceives the rhetoric of fiction as focused on techniques of domination, on “the rhetorical resources available to the writer . . . as he tries to impose his fictional world upon the reader” or on “the author’s means of controlling the reader” (Rhetoric of Fiction xiii). Booth assumes the end of imposing a unified fictional world of a given kind—such as the tragic, comic, or horrific—and concerns himself with advocating the unrestricted use of all rhetorical means to impose that world upon the reader.

Within Booth’s argument for the author’s use of all available technical means in imposing a fictional world on the reader, his polemical emphasis is on the uses of the author’s voice. He shows the usefulness of direct authorial commentary, and he argues that even when such commentary is lacking and the author resorts to the “hundreds of devices that remain for revealing judgment and molding response,” “the author’s voice is still dominant in a dialogue that is at the heart of all experiences with fiction” (Rhetoric of Fiction 272). Booth’s account of the novel at one point as dialogue among the author, narrators, characters, and readers (55) suggests Bakhtin’s dialogic model of novelistic discourse, but his repeated insistence on the dominance of the author
over narrators, characters, and readers links him more firmly with Vino-
gradov's monologic rhetorical theories of the novel than with Bakhtin's
dialogic account of the Dostoevskyan novel.

Bakhtin's account of the Dostoevskyan novel (Problems) gives us an
idea of how its ends differ from more familiar tragic or comic or rhe­
torical ends that Booth prefers. Bakhtin traces Dostoevsky's generic
sources along several lines of what he calls the "serio-comic" or carni­
valized genres. In all these genres, he writes, "there is a strong rhetorical
element, but in the atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a car­
nival sense of the world, this element is fundamentally changed: there
is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its
singular meaning, its dogmatism" (107). The "stylistic unity . . . of epic,
the tragedy, high rhetoric, [and] the lyric" is replaced by mixed styles in
the seriocomic genres (108) as "the epic and tragic wholeness of a person
and his fate" is replaced by self-division in which the hero "ceases to
mean only one thing" (117). Carnival familiarization suspends the usual
hierarchies of social values and destroys "epic and tragic distance" (124).
"Deeply ambivalent" responses to fundamental contradictions replace
the clarified responses of separate tragic and comic genres; promiscuous
participation replaces the conventional "division into performers and
spectators" (122).

This highly compressed summary of the seriocomic genre shows how
Bakhtin gives positive character to a literary effect that Booth reads as
a lack of the "clarity of distance" provided by the "traditional forms"
(Rhetoric of Fiction 331). To Booth, who argues for the reader's right
to know whether to "approve or disapprove, laugh or cry" (Rhetoric
of Fiction 331), Bakhtin's "joyful relativity of all structure and order"
(Problems 124) and his "ambivalent laughter" (166) are a challenge to
fundamental distinctions of literary effect. The clarification of response
one seeks in Aristotelian tragedy and comedy, and the determinate de­
cision aimed at in some Aristotelian rhetorical genres depend upon the
audience's recognition of the hero's standing and the audience's dis­
tance from the hero's situation, but the participatory response Bakhtin
envisions puts the hero and the audience in a carnivalized proximity to
one another that replaces definitive judgment with mutual vulnerability
and responsiveness.

In such a fictional world, the author does not design characters to
provoke laughter, tears, or admiration but to provoke articulate response.
Instead of issuing in a nonverbal recognition or feeling or attitude or
decision, the unfinalized interplay of value-charged discourse in the
Booth, Bakhtin, and the Culture of Criticism

Booth's rhetorical emphasis on determinate and generally non-verbal effect leads him to call "the critical disagreement" provoked by stories "a scandal" (Rhetoric of Fiction 315). For Bakhtin, that unsettled controversy can be a mark of success in a work designed to dialogic rather than rhetorical specifications.

Although Booth's rhetoric of fiction appears to share a perspective with Vinogradov's that makes their work appropriate to the monologic novel, I shall resist the temptation to set up their monologism in rhetorical or dialectical opposition to Bakhtin's dialogism, because the dialogic perspective finally does not allow for such an opposition in critical theory any more than in novelistic practice. Though Bakhtin himself, despite his dialogic principles, habitually makes use of this heightened opposition, he writes in the essay "Discourse in the Novel" that "even in those places where the author's voice seems at first glance to be unitary and consistent, direct and unmediatedly intentional, beneath that smooth single-languaged surface we can nevertheless uncover prose's three-dimensionality, its profound speech diversity, which enters the project of style and is its determining factor" (315). For Bakhtin, then, neither "monologic" novelists nor critical theorists would "mean only one thing" any more than does the hero of the Dostoevskyan novel, and even rhetorical discourse, Bakhtin concedes, "once [it] is brought into the study [of the novel] with all its living diversity, . . . cannot fail to have a deeply revolutionizing influence [in revealing] the internally dialogic quality of discourse" (Dialogic Imagination 269). While monological arguments, then, attempt to reduce their participants to representing single meanings, dialogic criticism recognizes the impossibility of such reduction and remains alert to what remains to be said from the unfolding positions of its concrete participants.

Booth's several recent engagements with Bakhtin's work reveal a more ambivalent dialogue than the reductive opposition between monologic and dialogic would allow. In the afterword to the second edition of The Rhetoric of Fiction (401–57), Booth singles out Bakhtin's dialogic poetics of the novel as especially impressive on the topics of language and style, historical and implied authors and readers, objectivity and technique, and ideology and form. Booth's acknowledgment of Bakhtin in his afterword is remarkable for its willingness to see Bakhtin as a challenge on the same issues that The Rhetoric of Fiction raises rather than to quarantine him as a theorist of some other critical mode with its own distinctive but unrhetorical questions. In this he shows the
effects of the responsive and open-ended pluralism he invents in Critical Understanding. But in his introduction to Caryl Emerson’s translation of Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics—an essay he sees as spilling over from the afterword to his own book—Booth combines this stance with the more defensive pluralism of his 1968 essay “The Rhetoric of Fiction and the Poetics of Fictions.” He generously acknowledges Bakhtin’s challenge to his rhetoric of fiction but also isolates that challenge in a critical mode distinct from his own.

Booth begins his introduction by establishing a common ground between his Chicago school Aristotelianism and Bakhtin’s dialogism on the question of ideology and form, claiming that both positions reject the opposition between abstract form and ideological content for an idea of form charged with value or ideology. Booth distinguishes his Chicago Aristotelianism, however, for its focus on the distinction between the effects authors intend in their ideologically charged formal unities and the technical means they use to achieve them. According to the Chicago premises Booth worked under in The Rhetoric of Fiction, “Authors,” he writes, “were . . . in charge of created unities that consisted of choices exemplified and judged” (“Introduction” xviii).

Booth’s introduction presents Bakhtin’s position, however, as if it transcended the whole question of fictional techniques and their relation to artistic ends. Bakhtin’s challenge, he writes, “has nothing to do with the author’s effort to produce a unified effect. Its subject is not the ordering of technical means toward certain effects so much as the quality of the author’s imaginative gift—the ability or willingness to allow voices into the work that are not fundamentally under the ‘monological’ control of the novelist’s own ideology” (xx). As Booth recognizes, he has assimilated Bakhtin’s position to Longinus—the alternative to Aristotle that the Chicago school has long acknowledged—an alternative concerned to demonstrate the presence of genius or greatness or sublimity in the author rather than to articulate the functioning of parts in the whole in a given work (xx, xxvii). Booth repeatedly emphasizes Bakhtin’s transcendence of mere technical concerns for more profound and important issues (xx, xxiv–xxv, xxvii), making his challenge to the rhetoric of fiction seem more like a moral and spiritual challenge to its questions than a technical and artistic challenge to Booth’s answers to them.

Booth thus diminishes his direct encounter with Bakhtin by conceding him the high ground and holding onto the low, but, as we have seen, the dialogics and the rhetoric of fiction challenge one another
Booth, Bakhtin, and the Culture of Criticism

more directly on the common grounds of the author’s chosen artistic task and the technical means of realizing it than Booth’s account of Bakhtin allows. While Booth repeatedly posits a dialogue in which “the author sees more deeply and judges more profoundly than his presented characters” (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 74), Bakhtin explicitly examines the novel in which not the author’s superior consciousness but the hero’s self-consciousness is the dominant of representation (*Problems* 49–50). Booth might see such a move as a shift in technical devices that “turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator” (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 164), but Bakhtin’s self-conscious hero is not a “center of consciousness” through whose perspective a story is told but the object of representation itself. The hero’s discourse in its response to discourses of the other characters and the discourse of the author is, for Bakhtin, the novel’s principal object of representation (*Problems* 63–65, 266).

Bakhtin’s dialogics of fiction thus reopens the question of what is means and what is end in the novel and suggests that in some cases at least the choices Booth advocates as technically effective would not serve the end Bakhtin imagines. If the hero’s self-consciousness is to be the dominant of representation, the author’s position must be shifted from the finalizing and judging role Booth defends to an actively dialogic interchange with the hero. “Only in the light of this artistic project,” Bakhtin writes, “can one understand the authentic function of such compositional elements as the narrator and his tone . . . and the . . . narration direct from the author” (*Problems* 64). This is not the critical language of someone unconcerned with “unified effect” and the “technical means toward certain effects” (Booth, “Introduction” xx), but that of someone who posits a different kind of effect, one that calls for a radical reconsideration of fictional means and ends. In Bakhtin’s serio-comic genre, as we have seen, it is not, as Booth says, that the characters “defy any temptation the author may have to fit them into his superior plans” (“Introduction” xxiii) but rather that, as Bakhtin says, “the freedom of the character is an aspect of the author’s design” and “is just as much a created thing as the unfreedom of the objectivized hero” (*Problems* 64–65). Bakhtin has not forfeited an interest in artistic design and the technique that serves it, but has radically enlarged the field of such designs, and so has not only shifted the possible functions of techniques but also shifted the very boundaries between technique and design.

But Booth’s linking of Bakhtin to the Longinian tradition may be seen not just as an evasion of this fundamental conflict over the means and ends of fiction but also as part of another agenda. Booth’s recent
book on the ethics of fiction shows him less interested in Bakhtin's bearings on the technical issues of the rhetoric of fiction than on the evaluative issues that now concern him. Even in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* itself, Booth opens the question of "the moral, not merely the technical, angle of vision from which the story is told" (265), and his identification of Bakhtin's argument with that "more profound" question may serve to acknowledge Bakhtin's challenge where it matters most to him now, rather than to deflect it from the issues of the rhetoric of fiction in which he is no longer engaged.

Booth's and Bakhtin's divergent accounts of the novel are not without implications for the discursive practices of the culture of criticism, but this issue can be joined more directly through examining Booth's *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, in which he explicitly addresses his version of Hartman's problem of "multiplying and fragmenting perspectives" in criticism. Though Bakhtin's relevant work was not available in translation when Booth wrote *Critical Understanding*, its argument nevertheless bears upon Booth's discussion and complicates the potential relations between Booth's rhetoric and Bakhtin's dialogics. Booth there imagines what he calls the problem of "critical variety and conflict" (3) in characteristically rhetorical terms that produce images of "chaos" (7) and "warfare" (37), but he also gestures repeatedly in the course of his inquiry toward dialogic formulations that would reconstruct his initial rhetorical image of "the immensely confusing world of contemporary literary criticism" (3). Booth's argument shifts from the rhetorical to the dialogic in another sense when he turns from generating potential discourses about poems and pluralism to engaging at length the words and works of three specific pluralist thinkers, all of whom have persuaded him of their diverse views.

Booth's opening formulation of the problem of "critical variety and conflict" envisions a characteristically rhetorical situation of diverse rhetors brought to a given occasion of discourse to mobilize, display, and distinguish their rhetorical resources. Booth imagines a dozen critics given W. H. Auden's "The Surgical Ward" and asked to say what they think is the most important point to be made about it, and he further imagines, in a characteristic hyperbole, that "an infinite number of possible interpretations" of "unlimited variety" would result (1–2). Following something like I. A. Richards's protocols in *Practical Criticism*, Booth's imaginary experiment brings diverse critical rhetoricians to a given occasion and asks them to produce their discourses in isolation from one another without mentioning a context of prior discourse on
Booth, Bakhtin, and the Culture of Criticism

the poem. In accord with Bakhtin's account of the practices of rhetorical genres, Booth's experiment produces what Bakhtin calls "potential discourses" of hypothetical critics instead of using the "actually uttered" words of published critics, and it issues not in what Bakhtin calls "an authentic heteroglossia" but only in "a mere diversity of voices" (*Dialogic Imagination* 353–54). To the "unlimited variety" of that "mere diversity" Booth adds the diverse potential judgments of his critical readers and thus produces his image of "the immensely confusing world of contemporary literary criticism" (3), but this confusing world to which he offers his pluralism as the best response is a function of the monologic rhetorical rules by which he constructs his image in the first place rather than a necessary or adequate portrait of the literary critical world itself.

A dialogic criticism, for its part, would emphasize the artificial isolation of Booth's hypothetical critics and offer the countermodel of the prose writer who

confronts a multitude of routes, roads, and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object. . . . For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they "do not sound." (*Dialogic Imagination* 278)

Bakhtin's account of this situation may still seem like confusion, but these other voices are many, not infinitely numerous, and they "sound" against the background of each other as the isolated voices of Booth's imaginary experiment do not. Furthermore they belong to a "social heteroglossia" that makes their various utterances reflect the finite, if heterogeneous, possibilities of critical discourse in a given time and place, developing those possibilities, revealing new ones, and making the participants recognizable to one another in their developing concrete diversity. The problem for dialogics is never what to make of the confusing multiplicity of voices and evaluations in general but always what to say in response to the differences among this particular set of actually or potentially interrelated voices.

Booth's initial vision of the production of critical discourse shares a
model of the determinants of that discourse with R. S. Crane's response to the questions, "'What ought I to say?' or 'What is important to say?'": it depends only on "the kind of problem you are interested in and . . . the resources of your 'language'" (43). Bakhtin's image of the prose writer would not only add to these determinants who has already spoken and whom the critic is addressing but would also reinterpret both the "interests" and the "language" of the individual critic as already derived from and implicated in the social discourses that entail the interests and languages of others. Even critical rhetors called to display their critical resources and interests in response to a given poem speak from a prior conversation and to unnamed mentors and opponents, share or oppose their interests, and revoice their languages.

Booth, however, at another point in his argument, reaches a position very similar to Bakhtin's. He writes,

No critic makes himself; every one of us discovers his own voice only by listening or mis-listening, to those before us who seem to have spoken best. This much is seldom denied. What seems to be forgotten is that, even after I have begun to speak what I mistakenly call "my own critical truth," my continued vitality as a thinking critic . . . depends on my continuing capacity to take other voices into account. My life, indistinguishable from the life of my critical tribe, requires that my thought be an exchange among "selves" rather than a mere search for ways to impose what I already know. (Critical Understanding 223)

Note here Booth's departure from a rhetoric of imposition and domination toward a dialogics of mutual determination through exchange. A different emphasis on these same relations might bring out, in addition, the way in which "my thought" is an "exchange among selves" from the start and "my critical tribe" is already, as Booth elsewhere puts it, "inherently and irreducibly plural" (40). My vitality is not just at stake in my continued engagement with other voices outside my tribe but in its continuing articulations of the conflicts within my tribe and within "myself." And my investment in those conflicts always orients me to the discourse of my tribe and the discourses of other tribes (to which I may in other ways also belong) and shapes my sense of "What I ought to say" and "What is important to say."

I never encounter a situation, then, in which the critical world is all before me and the choice of critical interests and languages is entirely open, nor do I ever display my critical resources as if no one else
had already spoken, or encounter the display of others’ resources as if I had never heard of them before. Even utter neophytes in professional critical discussions arrive with investments in critical terms and human relations from familial, religious, political, and other social context that permit preliminary orientation to those discussions, recognition of their participants, and investment in their stakes. At the beginning of my own critical training, a schooling in the texts of American democracy attracted me to Wordsworth’s vision of the poet as “a man speaking to men,” though feminism had not yet called my attention to how that phrase sounded from a different social location. Similarly, the religious predispositions of some of the New Critics drew them to Coleridge’s notion of the Godlike poetic imagination. Both the transcendental mystifications of some schools of criticism and the demystifying gestures of others are continuous with discourses in the precritical culture in which we are schooled, and our interests in the critical sophistications of these discourses are predisposed, though not wholly determined, by our interests in these discourses themselves.

From Crane’s dialectical point of view (see Olson), these predispositions may appear as mere “prejudices” that account for any given subject’s arbitrary departure from the ideal universal subject, who could disinterestedly entertain all interests and disinterestedly choose the appropriate critical mode of pursuing each interest (Critical Understanding 43), but Booth’s rhetorical commitments make him aware of both the difficulty of separating critical modes from the individual critics who practice them (28) and of the problem of distinguishing critical modes themselves (94). He approaches a dialogic reinterpretation of Crane’s philosophically distinct modes when he identifies the modes we have learned with the “‘school’ we were trained in” (254) that constitutes our intellectual dispositions, sets our agendas, enables our inquiries, and involves us in a historical conversation, but he concludes with a rhetorical reinterpretation of “critical modes not as positions to be defended but as locations or openings to be explored—in the traditional rhetorical terminology, as *topoi* or *loci*” (339).

As *topoi* or commonplaces, the diverse critical modes lose not only the philosophical discreteness of Crane’s dialectical formulation but also the individual, historical recognizability of the dialogic person-idea involved in the cultural discourse of schools of thought. Although Booth characterizes a *topic* as “an inhabited place in which valued activity can occur among those who know how to find their way in” (339), it has lost the historical specificity of a “place” like the Chicago school,
habited by R. S. Crane and Richard McKeon and engaged with such figures as M. H. Abrams and Kenneth Burke, all of whom constitute the dialogic agenda of Booth’s inquiry into pluralism. Both rhetorical *topoi* and dialectical modes have a generality that appears to transcend what Booth calls the “historical accident” (201) of specific affiliations and encounters. Booth wishes he could justify his decision to discuss Crane, Burke, and Abrams as topically or even dialectically representative of “kinds of pluralism,” but he cannot escape his admission that “my life encountered these lives at such and such moments, and the personal force of these men strengthened the impact of their pluralisms” (201).

_The Rhetoric of Fiction_, which distances itself from Chicago Aristotelian poetics by shifting its ground to Aristotle’s rhetoric, directs itself against the predominant consensus about fiction in the wider culture of criticism, but _Critical Understanding_ is dialogically preoccupied with powerful person-ideas affiliated specifically with the Chicago school. It self-consciously abandons the high ground of philosophical universality maintained in Crane’s dialectical pluralism, but its rhetorical pluralism, under the powerful influence of Crane’s voice, still ambivalently aspires to transcend the accidents of historically contingent rhetorical community and the violence of aggressively competitive rhetorical domination.

Booth’s preoccupation with that violence colors much of _Critical Understanding_ with the heightened diction of critics’ killing and being killed, annihilating each other, battling, destroying, violating, and living only at the cost of others’ death and defeat. Bakhtin’s vision of rhetoric’s intent “to bring about the destruction of the opponent” is right at home in this rhetorical battlefield. It would be fair to say that Booth strives to formulate a version of what Bakhtin calls “the dialogic sphere in which the word lives” as an alternative to this rhetorical scene of carnage (“Extracts” 182), and it is interesting that Booth makes his closest approach to Bakhtinian dialogics in his sections on the value of vitality. But it would also be fair to observe from our present perspective that the powerful habit of thinking in terms of the opposition between the familiar arts of rhetoric and dialectic limits the alternatives available to him. Booth resists the dialectical reduction of discourse to the “transpersonal” adjudication of “rival propositions” (28–29) just as he wishes for a better world than the bloody rhetorical battle of rival critics, but he is apologetic about using the word “dialogue” (237), deeply invested in the dialectical pluralism of modes he resists, and habituated to turn to rhetoric—in both theory and practice—when all else fails.
The book's most vital and provocative moments for me—its section on the value of vitality (220–23) to which I have already referred and its chapter on "overstanding" (235–56)—reach beyond the familiar alternatives and Booth's avowed affiliations to break new ground. Booth himself recognizes and dramatizes the novelty for him of his thinking in that chapter (236), where he not only defends the imposition of alien terms and questions on a text ("overstanding") against his own powerful commitments to submit to the author's intentions but also recognizes that the repertory, as he puts it, of questions and responses we might bring to any text "will in large part depend on how many other texts we have respected and absorbed in the past" (242–43) and on the "school we were trained in" (254). Booth’s closing "image of the reader we seek to propagate" provides also a powerful image of the mode of intelligibility of the dialogic self: such a reader "is one who is so active, so broadly experienced, so thoroughly 'possessed' by texts previously understood that his very individuality, no longer idiosyncrasy, will teach us not only something about himself but something about the text and the world" (256). Such readers individualize in their own texts the possibilities and conflicts of prior texts and thereby realize in themselves possibilities of the social world that are not simply peculiar to them but recognizable to others who are both inside that social world and outside that particular individual location in it. Booth's slightly embarrassed notion of "a kind of conversation or dialogue between a text and a reader" recognizes their participation in a common culture just as his affirmation of overstanding (Todorov translates a related Bakhtinian word as "exotopy") recognizes their inalienable alienation from one another.

The combined effect of these two recognitions would be to rule out the model of isolated critical rhetors from which Critical Understanding begins and to open the way to a dialogic model of "critical variety and conflict" that would resist both domination and dialectic for the sake of continuing the lives of historically diverse communities and historically diverse selves. Though a dialectical reading of Booth might expose the contradictions between his rhetorical and dialogic premises in order to refute them, and a rhetorical reading might try to exploit the inconsistencies between these premises in order to defeat him, a dialogic reading would try, as I have, to identify such divergences as productive sites for further conversation with him and to honor them as vital conflicting identifications within his exemplary life of ideas.
Notes

1. For extended discussion of the ideologist-hero, see Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 78–100. For more on the distinction among dialogics, dialectic, and rhetoric, see Bialostosky.

2. Todorov identifies him as “a linguist and marginal Formalist destined to become the official guiding light of Soviet Stylistics” (9), and Shukman calls him “the doyen of the Soviet school of stylistics” (v). See also Busch for an extended discussion of Vinogradov.

3. See Bakhtin’s remark that in dealing with the stylistic dilemma posed by the novel, “the re-establishment of rhetoric, with all its rights, greatly strengthens the Formalist position. Formalist rhetoric is a necessary addition to Formalist poetics” (Dialogic Imagination 267).

Bibliography


