The VOCATION *of a* TEACHER

RHETORICAL OCCASIONS
1967–1988

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FOR ELEVEN BELOVED TEACHERS:

Miss Alice Parker,

who in the first grade worried about how long it took a lumpish six-year-old to learn to read;

Miss Walker (first name unknown),

who in the second grade suggested that this non-reader take home *The Wizard of Oz* "because it might not be too hard for you";

Mrs. Tuttle (first name unknown),

who often read aloud to us in her fourth-grade class—*Tom Sawyer, Penrod and Sam,* and many a bouncing, silly poem;

Miss Jane McPherson,

who insisted, tired as she was in her final years of teaching fifth and sixth grades, that we revise every one of our little essays; and who somehow led us to compose and perform wonderful dramas based on our reading;

Mr. Wadley (first name unknown),

the only man in our school, who taught penmanship, poetic scansion, solfeggio, and three-part sight-reading—to sixth graders;

Miss Bessie Newman,

who, though in her final illness, induced us reluctant ninth graders to perform *Julius Caesar;*

Miss Gene Clark,

who in grade eleven flattered me into reading *Anthony Adverse* and *Brave New World;*

Mr. Luther Giddings,

who in his chemistry class taught the liberal arts;

Mr. Karl Young,

who in Freshman English unwittingly seduced me from chemistry to "LITCOMP";

Mr. "P. A." Christensen,

who mocked my brilliantly ironic sophomore compositions because they lacked "unity, coherence, and emphasis";

Mr. Ronald Crane,

who found so many genuine faults in my first *Tristram Shandy* chapter that I almost gave up on the doctoral program.

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.

H. G. Wells

Education has for its object the formation of character.

Herbert Spencer

Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal. 'Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.

Falstaff, in *Henry IV, Part 1.*

By being so long in the lowest form [at Harrow] I gained an immense advantage over the cleverer boys. . . . I got into my bones the essential structure of the normal British sentence—which is a noble thing. Naturally I am biased in favor of boys learning English; and then I would let the clever ones learn Latin as an honour, and Greek as a treat.

Winston Churchill

Preface

My title may seem to promise a bifurcated book: the calling of a teacher / the calling of a "rhetorician." But of course I see the two as overlapping—indeed as almost identical. To become a teacher of any subject is already to aspire to skill in at least one kind of rhetoric, the kind that changes the minds and possibly even the lives of students. And *English* teachers[1] are enmeshed even more inextricably than other teachers in the problems that were traditionally treated by rhetorical theorists—or so I shall try to show. My hope is thus to present not two clashing perspectives but a kind of stereoscopic, shifting image: through one lens, a forty-year vocation teaching students who continue to be far more rewarding and responsive than our recent popular exposés of national ignorance and educational disaster would suggest; through the other, one possible view, a rhetorician's, of what our job really is and how we might do it better.

A preliminary word, then, about my two overlapping lifetime projects:

Teaching English

"I assume you would agree that the profession of 'English' is in total, shameful disarray?" My challenger, whom I have just met in the cocktail hour before a banquet at which Secretary of Education William Bennett will be the main speaker, is Joseph Epstein, editor of *The American Scholar* and of a fine compilation of tributes to great teachers.[2]

What do you answer to a charge like that? Do you say, "Oh, yes, indeedy, we are in total, shameful disarray. You members of the wiser public are quite right; we teachers have all sold out, we are all timeservers and deadbeats; none of us knows what's what, not in the way you laymen, you editors and bureaucrats do"?

I don't say that. Instead I say: "Well, we have our problems, but I think we are obviously clearer about what we're doing than you magazine editors

1. I had taught English for a decade or so before I learned that some of my colleagues considered the very phrase "English teacher" a solecism. "We are not 'English'—that is 'British'—teachers; we are teachers *of* English." I belong to the National Council of Teachers *of* English, not the National Council of English Teachers; I teach in a Department *of* English, not in one of those benighted English Departments. But I prefer now to think of myself as what I started out to be (see Occasion 1): an English teacher.

2. *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* (New York, 1981).

are about *your* roles." Not a brilliant reply. He quite rightly ignores it and continues his charge.

"Well, everyone knows that most of you have simply bought into the latest fads—deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, God-knows-what. So far as I can tell, nobody is teaching students how to think critically, or how to read and write at a literate level. All of the studies show . . ."[3]

I assume, in my annoyance, that he has been doing some uncritical reading of the report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and of books like E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, William Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy*, Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn's *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, and Lynn Cheney's *American Memory*.[4] So I interrupt him to say that he ought to do a bit more hard thinking and actual observing before he . . .

But we are called to table and we part without my having a chance to set him straight. I could have told him, for example, about the excitement of the three-week "Coalition conference" I attended in July, along with fifty-nine other English teachers—elementary, secondary, and "higher"—a wonderfully challenging bunch who would shatter any observer's easy diagnoses and prescriptions about America's educational ills.[5] But it would have done no good, I can be sure. How can one hope to mediate between that group of devoted, articulate, energetic, and by-no-means despairing English

3. I must confess that, like Thucydides, like Herodotus, like Gibbon, like *Time* magazine, I report from memory speeches that must in fact have been somewhat different. Thucydides describes his own solution to the problem of historical accuracy: "My habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said." Our newspapers and weeklies don't seem to try even that hard. I aim for more literal accuracy than Thucydides claims, but I know from painful experience (checking diaries, comparing accounts of my past with hard data) that my capacity for literal verbal memory is no better than—yours?

4. National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Literature and U.S. History: The Instructional Experience and Factual Knowledge of High-School Juniors* (Princeton, 1987); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston, 1987); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: Education and the Crisis of Reason* (New York, 1987); William Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy* (Washington, 1984); Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our Seventeen-year-olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York, 1987); Lynn Cheney, *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools* (Washington, 1987).

5. The "Coalition conference" was sponsored by an "English Coalition" representing the following eight organizations: the Association of Departments of English, the College Language Association, the Conference for Secondary School English Department Chairpersons, the National Council of Teachers of English, the College English Association, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Conference on English Education, and the Modern Language Association. I offer a few pages about it at the end of Occasion 13.

teachers, and critics like Epstein with their easy indictments? In a way this book is an attempt at that impossible task, though I cannot, with the manuscript already in press, insert a full account of the Coalition's many ways of throwing doubt upon the superficialities and dogmatisms of those well-meaning popular critics. In any case, the book might be thought of as a start on what I'd like to say the next time a critic offers me some simple nostrum that in my view is more likely to kill than cure.

What *is* the profession of English teaching? Where *are* we, and where should we go from here? I here gather together a few of my efforts to think in public about such questions. In speeches and essays addressed mainly to students and teachers, only rarely or indirectly to members of "the public" like Epstein, I have tried both to uncover what we are up to in this puzzling profession, still only about a century old,[6] and to dramatize its importance. To be an English teacher—what is that? I turn to this vexing question in the introduction to Part One.

Practicing Rhetoric

"Occasional pieces" of the kind collected here are by definition not offerings of truths for the ages: each one is bound to its time and place. To some readers that may seem to condemn them, but any rhetorician will want to take that condemnation as a further occasion for thought: Just what *are* my time and my place? Today, addressing these readers? This decade, in Chicago? This century, in America? This bi-millennium, in Western Civilization? Our few million years' sojourn, on a troubled and perhaps lone planet? Some of my arguments seem placed in a time as old as Adam, while others will seem dated before the reviewers move in on me. None has a tone of permanence; I cannot claim, as some philosophers and scientists and poets do, that I am above the battle—whatever the battle turns out really to have been.

Those who pursue truth and beauty in pure forms, untainted by occasion, unconcerned for audiences, are never as different from the rhetorician as they sometimes claim. Human beings are by definition "occasional"—or what philosophers used to call "contingent"; we are part of the ever-fading, ever-renewing world. I have no doubt, unlike some of my fellow rhetoricians, that there are such things as eternal truths and beauties and "goods" (truth and beauty perhaps even the supreme goods); whatever they are, let us pursue them, let us even worship them. But let us not delude ourselves

6. See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987), for the best account I know of how we got to where we are today.

about the permanence of any one account of their splendors. Though philosophers, mathematicians, physicists, and even poets may try to ignore the restraints of occasions and address only eternal truths, everything they say can later be easily placed: nobody speaking in any other time or place would speak in quite *that* way. Even the aesthete who envies Euclid for looking on beauty bare and who writes with no thought about readers, even the purest poet must write from some unique here and now. Future academic examiners may legitimately ask students to place any author's special embrace of the eternal into its country and century, or even into its province and decade.

Still, there is something *more* occasional about these pieces of mine than about many an academic collection. Here the historical moment, with its peculiar rhetorical demands, is brought on the scene, often becoming a large part of the subject itself. Most of the pieces were "commissioned" (though often without fee). Almost all were composed with a quite precise picture of a specific occasion in mind: hall, podium, mike, and audience. Indeed, as I wrote them—and they were all written and revised many times before I arrived at a more or less "spontaneous" delivery—I heard myself speaking them (usually trying them out, aloud), and I always wrote with some kind of imaginary picture of listeners responding with smiles, scowls, or furrowed brows. Such prophecies often proved to be wildly awry: an imagined audience of thirty teachers who would have read the materials I sent them in advance turned out, in the reality faced a week or so later, to be ten teachers, along with two hundred captive freshmen reluctantly attending as part of their "reading" assignment; the audience for a "public lecture" was discovered to contain nobody from the public, only teachers. But such surprises don't really matter; the pictures have done their work. They have required me to put what I have to say into a language and form that I think best suited to get it heard, *here and now*.

That kind of attention to audience is part of what a committed rhetorician is committed to. It is by no means all, as I hope my discussions of rhetoric in Occasions 2, 6, and 19 will show. The study of rhetoric leads us into locations and stances that will surprise anyone who thinks of it only in the contemptuous definition implied whenever it appears in a newspaper headline. Most strikingly, students of rhetoric—in contrast to most students of linguistics, say—usually dwell on ways to improve it; we claim that some uses of rhetoric are better than others, and even that some occasional utterances turn out to be "for the ages." We devote our lives—and our occasional discourses—to discovering what makes for good rhetoric on a good rhetorical occasion.

The quest is naturally a bit imperialistic. Again and again throughout history, rhetoric has claimed for itself what I claim for it in Occasion 19:

entire dominion over all verbal pursuits. Logic, dialectic, grammar, philosophy, history, poetry—*all* are rhetoric. Even the graphic and musical arts have sometimes been claimed. But though the notion that "everything is rhetoric" is not a modern invention, this century, with its emphasis on language as the center of all inquiry, has perhaps exhibited more than its share of us empire-builders. Even the recent fashion in "deconstructing" all inquiries into their rhetorical tropes can be seen as just one further manifestation of the age-old claim with which I began: every writer or speaker addresses an occasion—and hence is a rhetorician.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when I became an "English teacher" I soon found myself viewing more and more of that confused stack of subjects called "English" as simply branches of rhetoric. And when I later on began to talk publicly about the profession and how to improve it, I naturally put my own rhetoric into the language of traditional rhetoricians. Soon I was declaring myself as not just an English teacher but a professor of rhetoric.

In doing so again now, I obviously risk attracting to my enterprise all of the pejorative overtones that the term "rhetoric" has accumulated since the time of Plato. "You'll say anything that will produce an effect, regardless of the truth." "You don't care about substance, only about surface." "Why should I believe you, when you implicitly claim to have been trained, as a sophist, to make the worse appear the better cause? The speaker I want to believe is the one who speaks spontaneously, from the heart, pursuing truth unstintingly, uncorrupted by the artifices and trickeries of mere rhetoric."

I can't do much about such charges here (though I face them in several of the following pieces), except to give the boy scout's salute and swear that, while in every case I have of course done what I could to "accommodate to the audience," as the tradition has it, I have tried never to sacrifice whatever truth even the most disinterested inquiry would lead an inquirer to say about the subject—whatever seemed to me, in that time and place, to be *the* truth. Pursuing what I have hoped will become a *shared* truth, I have always tried to discover, not only in the situation, but in my subject and its solid resistance to manipulation, what Aristotle calls "all the available means of persuasion"—including the means of persuading myself. I think of the results less as models for "how to do it" than as invitations to consider the most important of all professions as a vocation—a calling to improve our innumerable rhetorical occasions.

If my personal fusion of "English" and "rhetoric" is in a sense a kind of historical accident, I consider it a happy one, since I would not have met at least some of those to whom I dedicate the book if "English" as a field had been less ambiguously defined.

Still, the vocation is obviously not confined to anybody's definition of "English." I might well have discovered the profession of teacher-as-rhetorician (and what I later will rather timidly call "rhetorologist") if I had begun my studies under quite a different label. I have colleagues in this newly flourishing grand old field who are officially teachers of "speech" or "communications" or even political science; some are classicists, medieval historians, philosophers, lawyers, sociologists, cultural anthropologists. At least one is an economist, and I know two who teach accounting. But "English" departments are (at least in America) the home of a large majority of those who do serious rhetorical research and teaching, with or without the label. English departments have in this century carried the major responsibility for general education in the arts that classically were assigned to rhetoric: the arts of reading (or interpretation), of writing and speaking, and of the thinking that is inseparable from good writing and speaking. Every college that has any requirements at all requires some kind of freshman course in what I early learned to call "LITCOMP": a fusion of serious encounters with powerful writing and instruction in how to write well. Throughout my lifetime that course has generally been staffed by those of us who call ourselves English teachers. This marriage of rhetoric with something called English may prove quite temporary, as is suggested by the founding in the last decade or so of an increasing number of independent composition staffs and rhetoric departments. The marriage has never been free of tensions and charges of abuse and neglect. But for me, ever since that glorious freshman year in the LITCOMP class taught by an "English teacher," Karl Young, the marriage has seemed almost as natural as breathing.

To turn miscellaneous occasions into a genuine book requires some tough decisions, even when, as is true here, the various subjects addressed really belong together. For one thing, just how much of the repetition that was inevitable as the speaker moved from occasion to occasion will readers of a *book* tolerate or enjoy? As linguists insist, every act of communication depends on a good deal of "redundancy": what looks like "the same thing" must be said many times if it is to be heard at all. Every author must thus decide, consciously or unconsciously, just how much repetition will be found useful or tolerable—by some imagined, ideal reader. But collections are a special problem: the book may say to the collector, "Cut that anecdote, that allusion: you already used it back on page 35"—only to hear the original occasion reply, in wounded tones, "You can't cut *that:* it's essential to my argument here." Often I've listened to the book, even when it has ruled out many a favorite speech or essay. But sometimes I've had to honor the occasion.

The fuzzy borderline is what makes the trouble. Should I, for example, cut my reference to Malcolm X in one essay just because I have referred to him, though much more briefly, in another? To cut him from either would distort the case I wanted to make for *that* audience. (Indeed, Malcolm X appeared in four talks that I do not reprint; for some time there in the sixties I found him pertinent to almost every occasion.) Or again, should I cut my notion of courses in "Curiosity" from the speech to undergraduates in 1968, because I developed it further in a utopian spoof addressed to beginning scholars in 1981 and in my speech to the entire University of Chicago community in 1987? My hope is that there are no repetitions not justified by altered occasions and emphases.

A second editing problem was raised by readers who advised me to cut all allusions and examples that "date" these pieces. Should I bring each early essay up to date, by changing references to fit 1988? To do so would be to weaken the very embeddedness in occasion that I have wanted to emphasize. I have thus confined my revisions mostly to clarifying what I said *then*, not to making each piece say exactly what I would say *now*.

To hold to that decision has been especially difficult as I have faced the abundant instances of "critic . . . *he*" and "teacher . . . *his*" in the earlier pieces. These days I do not let myself say, "Every teacher must face his own choices," even though the various stylistic dodges that this choice forces me into are sometimes cumbersome (see Occasion 3, note 1). Many of my colleagues, male and female, resent the fussing of us feminists, female and male, about a usage that is "built into the language and that everyone understands as covering both sexes." I think that *they* are wrong, for reasons that Occasion 11 only partially makes clear. In any case, I've kept the pronouns pretty much as originally spoken or published because that's a fair record of how I (one? men?) wrote and spoke then. Only on Occasion 9 have I tried to clean things up and thus in a sense lied about my past.

Except for Occasions 3 and 13, these pieces were originally spoken; I was armed with a complete typescript but improvised frequently and sometimes relied heavily on physical signs of humor, sincerity, and passion. Written and spoken English differ more than most people realize; what has been spoken to good effect may prove puzzling or ineffective or even embarrassing when read cold. I've had to cut many of the jokes, corny when read cold, and I've revised some sentences to provide written equivalents for what in delivery was sometimes repaired on the spur of the moment and sometimes papered over with a confident smile. But to have removed all signs of oral delivery would have violated the entire project.

It would be absurd to try to acknowledge all of those who have contributed, as listeners and readers, to the final form of this volume. But it

would be even more absurd not to thank two of them: Phyllis Booth, not only for reading various drafts but for frequently saving me from panic, a week or so before delivery, by suggesting possible rhetorical maneuvers; and Winifred Horner, for a reading that taught me what the book is really about.

Contents

PART I · *TO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS UNDER SIEGE*

You should never be polite to an English teacher. They don't deserve it. As a group, they are the most persistent and petty nitpickers in our entire society.

Mike Royko

He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.

Attributed to many, including G. B. Shaw. Quoted by nine out of ten parents whose children consider teaching as a career.

C-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of the book, he goes and does it.

Mr. Squeers, in *Nicholas Nickleby*

It is safer to have a whole people respectably enlightened than a few in a high state of science and the many in ignorance.

Thomas Jefferson

To be an educator is quite obviously *not* a noble thing to be. But it is surely one of the best remaining ways to combat an ignoble world.

Anonymous