



The Ethics of English

by Russell Kirk

*"When a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy,
it ceases to be a subject of interest."*

— William Hazlitt

**The Vocation of a Teacher:
Rhetorical Occasions, 1967-1988**
by Wayne C. Booth
Chicago: University of Chicago Press;
353 pp., \$24.95

The treason of the teacher of English: that is the principal subject of Professor Booth's discourses over two turbulent decades in the academy. Dr. Booth, a temperate rhetorician, does not call this dereliction of duty "treason." Yet he makes it clear that a great many college professors of English literature have cast aside the venerable discipline of rhetoric, the art of persuasion—preferably beautiful and just persuasion.

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Michigan.*

I find the most moving of his "Occasions" the fourth one, "To Warring Factions in an Up-to-Date 'English Department,'" a talk given at Syracuse University in 1987. Mr. Booth hopes that some beliefs are shared by most instructors of English literature:

First, what we label with the catchall term 'English' is the most important of all college subjects. Some of us think it is most important because in our culture it is the major heir of a once-glorious liberal arts tradition. Call us the Ancients. Others of us think it is the most important because in our culture it is the standard-bearer of some new vision that is to replace the outward purposes and fixed canons of the past. Call us the Mods. Both groups

are aware that because of the basic requirements and elective systems in most colleges and universities, our elementary courses are the only ones that all students will be touched by—if they are touched at all. If students are ever to obtain an education that will help them become the kind of persons we hope they'll be (note my highly general language: all the terms such as "liberal," "humane," "free," "creative," are suspect), if students are not to become simply shallow, self-satisfied, intellectually lifeless dogs in the great money-and-power machines offered by too much of the rest of the world, the transformation will occur in one of our courses.

How true this passage is. Half a century ago, when I was an undergraduate, I perceived that the Department of English at Michigan State was carrying on almost the whole mission of a liberal education, abandoned by other disciplines. If English departments should be conquered by an inhumane "scholarly" specialization, or surrender to fantastic ideologies, I conjectured even then that we would be compelled to dance in what the American Humanists had called "a devil's sabbath of whirling machinery."

Just that has come to pass, on the great majority of campuses: arid specialization in literature, with consequent decay of good teaching; and on the other hand, often simultaneously, the bellicose ascendancy of deconstructionism—the maddest school of literary criticism ever conceived—feminism, revolutionary ideologies, and other anti-literary fads and foibles. This revolt against humane letters seems to have been carried farthest at Duke University (not mentioned by Booth), where professorial zealots for deconstructionism are recruited by salaries in excess of \$100,000, and the oldest American literary journal, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, has been captured by the innovators and converted into a journal of "gender and race."

Professor Booth, in this complex and sometimes subtle book, rejects the charge that the victory of the pseudo-teachers of English is not complete. (For that matter, even at Duke there survive Professor Grover Smith, the Eliot scholar, and some colleagues who obdurately resist the champions of lit-

erary nihilism.) In some matters an innovator in criticism himself, Booth does not mean to establish a hegemony of traditionalists; but he sets his face against the fantastics of "English" who have done their best to substitute their personal prejudices, whims, and resentments for the teaching of rhetoric.

He is grieved by the evaporation of reasonable discourse in the academy; by the barriers to intelligent communication that result from the degradation of rhetoric. Here he is on Jacques Derrida, so much admired by the votaries of the nihilistic school. First he quotes some sentences from the opening of one of Derrida's chapters:

What about the voice within the logic of the supplement? Within that which should perhaps be called the "graphic" of the supplement?

Within the chain of supplements, it was difficult to have separate writing from onanism. Those two supplements have in common at least the fact that they are dangerous. They transgress a prohibition and are experienced within culpability. But, by the economy of difference deliberately spelled with an "a," as a special term, they confirm the interdict they transgress, get around a danger, and reserve an expenditure.

Then Booth comments, "Now I have worked for about a decade to become comfortable with the recondite language in which that passage is written, and I think I sort of understand it.

Unlike some of my more traditional colleagues, I am utterly convinced that it is *not* nonsense, though it is opaque somewhat—more so than in the original French. Still, if I were to study carefully the chapter that follows it and then write a summary, the chances are about ninety-nine to one that Derrida would *not* say of it, 'Bravo, you have understood.'"

Aye, rhetorical art no longer joins together even professors of English; and a host of charlatans or of sour haters of all received wisdom, with such as de Man and Derrida for their prophets, have dashed down the tenure track and stormed the citadel of humane letters.

Dr. Booth is seriously disturbed by all this. But his book will be read only by teachers of English: it would be incomprehensible to the serious reading public, and even to most university people. Its allusions, digressions, and sardonic passages will be understood within the Gothic walls of the University of Chicago, but perhaps only there. The very frame of the book makes the production eccentric: ephemeral mordant lectures, in part repetitious, set in small type.

This is a pity, for there occur in Booth's *Occasions* very keen perceptions; and Professor Booth is a scholar who earnestly believes that literature has an ethical end, that true rhetoric deserves vigorous defense, and that the very survival of our civilization depends upon the imagination, reason, and rhetoric that used to be imparted by competent teachers (as distinguished from abstract specialists). Yet, Dr. Booth's own rhetoric is impaired by the hard necessity of addressing undereducated and often hostile audiences of barbarous Ph.D.'s, who will tolerate cleverness in a speaker but not words of wisdom. One finishes the book with an impression of the author's ingenuity, rather than of his sagacity. But one forgives this, thinking of the mentality of America's advanced intelligentsia, whom Booth is endeavoring to persuade. There come to mind two lines from Kipling:

Even in that certain hour before
the fall,
Unless men please they are not
heard at all.

LIBERAL ARTS

A MORAL EDUCATION

When apt and good words began to be neglected . . . then also began ill deeds to spring, strange manners to oppress good orders, new and fond opinions to strive with old and true doctrine, first in philosophy and after in religion, right judgment of all things to be perverted, and so virtue with learning is contemned and study left off.

—Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*

Ages are no more infallible than individuals.

—John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty"

Passion and Pedantry

by E. Christian Kopff

*"Lord, what would they say
Did their Catullus walk this way?"*
—W.B. Yeats

Gilbert Murray, OM. 1866-1957
by Sir Duncan Wilson
Oxford: Clarendon Press;
488 pp., \$49.95

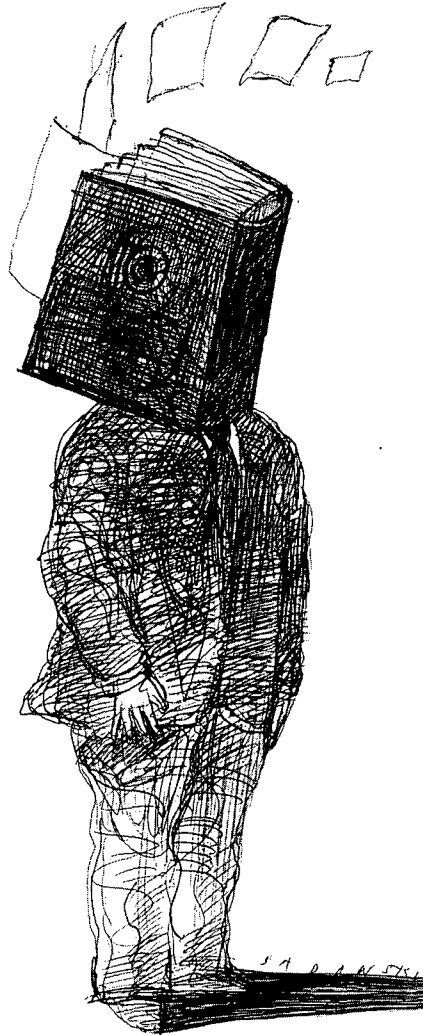
J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work
by Robert Ackerman
Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press; 380 pp., \$39.50

William Butler Yeats's picture of the scholar is not a pretty one ("All cough in ink. All wear the carpet with their shoes.") and literature does not give us many scholarly heroes. Most literary pedants are like George Eliot's Casaubon; boring, impotent in the face of the real world, and, ultimately, not even a very good scholar. The rare positive image comes from popular entertainment—Van Helsing and Indiana Jones. Even as men of letters, few academics have any impact outside university circles.

It was different in the last Silver Age of Western civilization, before World War I. To take England and the field of classics, for example, it is easy to think of three men with solid scholarly reputations whose names were well known outside the groves of academe: A.E. Housman, Sir James George Frazer, and Gilbert Murray.

Of the three, Housman's work has stood up best. On either side of the Great War there was a popular frenzy for his poetry and there still remains a committed group of readers and reciters, some of whom, such as John Sparrow and Christopher Ricks, are distinguished critics. His scholarly writings and critical editions are still important for the subjects he worked on, and his prose is read with pleasure. His academic career was spotty. As an undergraduate at Oxford, he never won a prize for Latin verse composition and "was plou-

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ghed in Greats," that is, failed his final exams. After taking a pass degree, he won recognition by his published works and became professor of Latin first at London and then at Cambridge. Although he was a best-selling author and a political conservative, his career advanced on the basis of its objective merit. Feminists in classics boast that no similar figure could survive today.

Frazer won a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, after studying at Glasgow in his native Scotland. It was while holding a fellowship that he made his contributions to scholarship. Cam-

bridge gave him no other academic honor, although he won a professorship at Liverpool, honorary degrees from Oxford and the Sorbonne, and a knighthood. (After World War I friends did establish the Frazer Lectureship at Cambridge.) He framed his career with long scholarly commentaries on lesser works of classical literature. He interrupted this work to produce the first edition of *The Golden Bough* in two volumes in 1890. The third edition appeared from 1911-1915 in 12 volumes. Both the first and third editions were reprinted as late as the 1970's, and the one-volume abridgment of 1922 was a best-seller. In his own day the combination of 18th-century pomposity and immense learning won him fame that reached popular adulation. The books, dissertations, and articles on Frazer's influence and "impact" have by no means exhausted the study of his significance. Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Tangled Bank* (1956) ranks Frazer with Darwin, Marx, and Freud. In recent decades, some of the most creative scholars in the humanities are still citing and discussing Frazer, as one can see in Rene Girard's study of the scapegoat and Walter Burkert's work on ritual in Greek tragedy and mythology. (Robert Ackerman knows nothing of this, but instead tells us that "Not only are his answers superseded, but more important his questions likewise are no longer relevant.")

Gilbert Murray had a most spectacular academic career, winning prize after prize at his public school and at Oxford. Directly out of university, he was appointed to the chair of Greek at Glasgow because of his marvelous ability to compose Greek prose. He resigned after ten years, but in 1908 was appointed Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, which chair he held until 1936. His translations of Euripides were the standard English versions for the first half of the century. Before