Quieting the Groans: A Student-Centered Approach to Teaching Philip Booth
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Introducing poetry in the classroom has its challenges, and many of us have experienced the "almost universal groan" (Lucas 43) that the genre can elicit from students, which may be the extent of their participation. I have, though, found the work of Philip Booth (1925-2007) excellent for developmental and composition courses. Many of Booth's poems in Relations, his 1986 collection of selected works, are clear and accessible, useful for teaching fundamental elements of poetry. Collins and Scholes maintain that we should present poems "in a way that encourages readers to connect the poems to their lives" (qtd. in Showalter 64), and Booth's themes of community and self-exploration also provide an opportunity for students to recognize how they intersect with the literature they encounter. By extension, Booth's work lends itself to writing assignments that target a student's personal experience. Collins and Scholes also encourage educators to draw from a wider pool of poetry; here again, Booth fits the bill; while he is, of course, a celebrated American poet, his poems offer relief from certain much-anthologized works, which may indeed partially account for the "groan" we may have encountered. In any case, as many of students side with Boswell, who
enjoyed writing about "that favorite subject, myself," the student-centered approach is invariably an educator's ally. For developmental writing courses comprised of at least some second-language learners, emphasizing Booth's American-ness can help students discover how their sense of self relates to the United States. Domestic students also respond well to Booth for similar reasons. While my focus is predominately on writing courses, literature instructors can adapt any ideas here for their use as well. And for educators interested in theory, I have found M. M. Bakhtin's thoughts in Toward a Philosophy of the Act and Lorraine Code's "Second Persons" pedagogically valuable. Equally worthwhile is employing visual aides, a beneficial method for complementing Booth's imagery.

In Expository Writing, my strategy is to introduce a prominent image in Booth's poetry: the sea, especially the coast of Maine. In classrooms equipped with computers and projectors, generating images of Booth's setting creates an effective hook. Identifying those who have visited Maine is a useful follow-up, as is identifying any surfers (my school has many), who tend to possess remarkable knowledge of the ocean, from point breaks to undertows, and can generate class discussion. "A Slow Breaker," then, is a good place to start with Booth. The speaker begins with "Washing on granite/before it turns/ on itself, away (lines 1-3) before moving to specific images of

  clear green wash,
  the flashing, cold,
  specific gravity of it,
  calls the eye down
  to what we thought to
  look into, to all we
  cannot see through. (lines 6-12)
This is a teachable poem; the spare yet strong imagery is student-friendly, and rudimentary poetic terminology can be introduced, which would be particularly effective in introductory literature courses. Diane Middlebrook argues that conveying "a precise vocabulary" is crucial for teaching poetry (qtd. in Showalter 65), so Booth's accessibility is again an asset. However, instructors choosing to de-emphasize any literary analysis could safely discuss metaphor and touch on form and prosody without overwhelming the class with terminology. Beyond this, we could compare Booth's breaker with a vision of our own. The "clear green wash, / the flashing cold" could dovetail with a quick explanation of imagery. Moreover, we could see if anyone discovered an intersection between form and content (the poem's structure and the image of the water), as the first stanza reads like an ebbing tide, with the comma between "itself" and "away" creating a pause, which reflects the breaker's flow. Finally, we might ask what the speaker (as opposed to Booth, if we choose to make any distinctions at this point) meant in the final stanzas. What is it that "we / cannot see through"? Presenting the concept of metaphor here might help students understand Booth's idea of the breaker.

"A Slow Breaker" could also be utilized in a developmental writing course comprised of some (if not all) second-language learners, where teaching vocabulary and the formation of clear, logical paragraphs are primary learning outcomes. I have found including poetry--particularly Booth's--in developmental courses has advantages: the works are short and thus inviting to students; additionally, poetry offers a break from grammar exercises, thereby establishing some variety (for both students and instructors). However, literary analysis--at least for me--is secondary in these courses. As in Expository Writing, we could make use of visual aides as an attention-getter, a proactive technique to quiet the groans. Subsequently, an in-class paragraph assignment, such as "What is your first memory of the ocean?" would foreground the student experience. If students respond, presenting Booth as a New England poet can plant
some interest in American poetry. Utilizing Booth's images of the American landscape would be my focus, with "Vermont: Indian Summer" as another useful piece:

sun
and
weathervane
are still; the
cows wait, hillside
crows caw down to
barn the first-
frost burn
of sumac, maple,
and sideyard apple. (lines 13-20)

Regional images could again be juxtaposed with photographs on a document camera or Internet search, which would in turn serve to illustrate Booth as a truly American literary figure.

Yet American writers also impact Booth, as he addresses "Letter from a Distant Land" to Henry David Thoreau. "Letter" might be too difficult for developmental students of English; however, abstracting parts of the work could lead to discussion of Thoreau as a major American writer who has influenced Booth; together, they form a community of artists. Additionally, a brief discussion of why the speaker sees Thoreau as "distant kin" (line 1) could lead to a paragraph assignment on important people in our lives. Lorraine Code states in "Second Persons" that an individual "is always a 'second person,' open to the effects of an interdependence that is manifested as much in propensity to be influenced as it is in a capacity to influence" (363). Code's insights are helpful in understanding self and community. I would keep Code to myself, but share the essence of her argument: that we are defined by relationships to others. By extension, asking the class to define family may lead us toward
understanding why Booth considers Thoreau his "odd uncle" (line 35). Assigning students to write their own letter to a meaningful person in their lives, or perhaps even a literary figure, also provides a student-centered opportunity for the class.

Similar assignments can be implemented in Expository Writing; however, instead of paragraphs focusing on topic sentences and supporting details, an essay on influential people would get the students writing about themselves, a strategy that has worked for me. We could also team "Letter from a Distant Land" with "Thoreau Near Home" to consider how place functions in self and community. In this poem, Thoreau travels abroad at a young age looking for work. Having no luck, he boards a ship and

Within a week, Thoreau would be home;  
two months from now he would be twenty-one.  
He stood watch on Castine, the farthest east  
he ever sailed. He thought back to the Iliad and Homer;  
he found the day fit for eternity, and saw  
how sunlight fell on Asia Minor. (lines 37-42)

On one level, students, especially international, could relate to extensive travel. The class might also observe how Booth takes a different approach to his mentor in this poem; here, the speaker attempts to re-create Thoreau's journey in an effort to understand him more thoroughly. And juxtaposing both Thoreau's poems underscores Booth's thoughts on setting and self, which students might respond to considering their venture into college. Moreover, I would inquire how a student's international self relates to their new American community. Domestic class members could compare their American selves to any experiences with international travel. In any case, Booth supplies a springboard into for reflection and
meaningful assignments, which also gives American literature some clout in the classroom, with--ideally--little resistance from our students.

Booth's immediacy is another aspect of his poetry worthy of class time. "If It Comes" possesses a clear sense of urgency. "If it comes/to that, go," the speaker begins,

to bed late,  
so, if you  
have to wait  
without sleep,  
you can see  
the luminous  
dial [...] (lines 1-9)

The enjambment propels the poem and complements its intensity. I might ask why Booth chooses this format, encouraging the students to consider the interplay between form and content. We could also explore what is at stake for the speaker, and what "It" refers to. Bakhtin's notions of *postuok* and non-alibi in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* illuminate urgency in poetry, as the non-alibi serves as a bridge between an act and its representation; thus, we are present in an act and its double. Bakhtin, then, as Holquist asserts, seeks to return "to the naked immediacy of experience" (x). Similarly, raw and immediate experience is--in a way--what the speaker of "If It Comes" attempts to convey. Presenting Booth's take on immediacy could lead to an essay on an urgent moment in life or what constitutes urgency. I believe, however, that Booth rather than Bakhtin should be our emphasis in the classroom. While I have known colleagues who have successfully integrated literary theory into their lower-division classes, including theoretical approaches can be perplexing for students and jeopardize their enjoyment of literature, which, of course, is counter to our intentions as educators.
"If It Comes," though, may be inaccessible for many developmental students."Moment," however, is perhaps a better choice. The speaker states that "Moment on moment/each moment blooms." Further on, a moment develops "whether / or not we let it / occur to us" (lines 5-7), which, I think, is digestible for beginning writers. Students might detect Booth’s theme of time and share their own thoughts on the subject. International students would have a chance to convey non-Western concepts of time, which we could connect to Booth.

Finally, I would utilize the more conventional concept of community in Booth’s poetry."Before Sleep" depicts Booth’s attitude toward his New England community. The speaker, who creeps into the village after dark, states,

I stand at the edge of the tide
letting my feet feel into the hillside

to where my dead ancestors live.
Whatever I know before sleep
surrounds me. I cannot help know. (l1-15)

This is pure Booth: the New England landscape blending with community and self. Here, we return to the ocean (and any visual aides at the professor’s disposal), an easily identifiable image for most students. The influence of others resurfaces here as well. How, we could ask, does influence create community? Furthermore, I could inquire how the students’ sense of community compares with Booth’s.

Another poem that foregrounds community is "That Clear First Morning." The young speaker remembers the first day he stays up all night; he sees men "waking to coffee" and women "tending the coffee and making / lunches (lines 11-13). The speaker’s identification with community leads to an epiphany, as "certain and new as the sun" he
starts fresh "with that sure morning" (lines 18-19). Here, I would approach Booth through the concept of epiphanies and how they affect us. With the majority of our students being eighteen or nineteen years old, they can relate to the youthful speaker. Presenting the concept of revelation through Booth's accessible work will sharpen our students' literary acumen, making their subsequent English courses more manageable and rewarding. For our Introduction to Poetry classes, "That Clear First Morning" could work for an early explication assignment.

Overall, Philip Booth's extraordinary work can provide educators with an accessible and engaging means of acquainting students with American poetry. Booth's combination of depth and clarity is student-friendly, offering diverse classrooms a platform for self-exploration and assessment: a student-centered approach. Utilizing computer-based visuals can also enhance the students' experience of Booth. My own experience suggests that international students particularly appreciate Booth; since many are interested in America's landscape, Booth's vision of the New England is an invaluable resource. Yet students of all backgrounds, I believe, will meet Booth with reflection rather than resistance—a groan-free introduction to a genre with limitless possibilities for students of English.
Works Cited


