

*All in All (More or Less): Rhetorical Considerations in Literature, Thought, and Experience.* Walter Jost. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2024. 649 pages. \$139.99, ISBN: 9783031563003, 303156300X

With this major new work Walter Jost has, as with all his writing, offered a rhetorical perspective as a powerful humanist mode of understanding, as a practical communicative sensibility, and as a competence for making one's way around and through the world. Here he extends this invitation to a more ambitious purpose. Although Jost's rhetoricality has always had epistemic and ontological entailments subversive of the reigning orthodoxies, here he gives that ambition a local habitation and a name, American low modernism. He sees the potential of this literary genre for exemplifying a radically mixed mode of discourse that braids rhetoric together with a host of other disciplinary arts, allying with philosophers, literary critics, cultural theorists, filmmakers, and poets to fashion a hybrid tool of literary argument and evaluation of extraordinary breadth and suppleness. The book's purpose is admirably summarized by Jost himself: **"My** purpose is to display instruments that can help us to improve our cultural conflicts for the health of the whole, to make corrections from within and across cultures, and to use ordinary language to correct and develop ordinary language" (32).

One of the challenges in grasping the ambition of this project is that it quite purposefully and militantly avoids not just the disciplinary straightjackets that compartmentalize argument, style, logic, poetry, grammar, fiction, ordinary language, etc., which is to say, essentially all modalities of imaginative and expressive discourse, but he also refuses through his own deeply engaged performance to disaggregate primary and secondary, theoretical and practical, critical and creative levels of discourse, divisions that typically demarcate the creative artist, the theorist, and the critic. It is not revolutionary to point out that poets do literary criticism, literary critics do philosophy, philosophers do poetry, fiction films do argument, but these boundaries lose almost any purchase in

Jost's studied **mélange** of discursive registers. "Let us dream [of] loosely analogous mysteries," he quotes from Jean Paulhan (294). Whether it is a tour de force, a high wire act, or an invigorating experiment in the limits of literary theory and criticism, each reader will decide, but there is no doubt that this is an ambitiously erudite effort to grant rhetoric's capacity for judgment a broadly comprehensive interdisciplinary authority.

To accomplish this feat Jost plays rhetoric's trump cards in its disciplinary debates and status fights—It finds its grounding in the contingency of situation, mastery of topical reasoning, deployment of example and narrative to locate the general in the particular, and performative unity of form and content. Jost places these advantages in service of a practical aim: developing critical judgment within a literary genre that he judges most suitable for exemplifying the chameleon-like plasticity of the discursive arts. I say rhetoric as the dominant term of art, but Jost's rhetoric comprehends grammar, logic and philosophy as a systematic instrument of public and private communication. It means not only orienting judgment from the particular concrete historical situation, but also giving serious weight to the panoply of human emotions, motives and interests that inform ordinary everyday argument, or as he puts it, "the intellectual *and* ethical *and* desiring-willful embodied being, a being 'thrown' into a more or less indeterminate world" (14). The most striking characteristic of this book is its insistent transgression of the normally disparate levels of discourse—between invention and criticism, between primary and secondary texts, between poetry, philosophy, rhetoric, and grammar—a principled heterogeneity intended to destabilize the proscribed boundaries of disciplinary discourse.

The title of Jost's book captures a certain duality that he actually wants to cultivate. *All in All*, on the one hand, signals the architectonic ambition to forge a multi-modal instrument of public argument, evaluative judgment, and theoretical imagination. *More and [not and; should be: or] Less*, on the other hand, embraces the rough-hewn modesty of rhetoric's ordinary, lowbrow voice as a

practical art of public communication. This prudential flexibility warrants his ranging freely among a heterogeneous host of multi-disciplinary resources in the construction of his model of judgment, one that is as comfortable in the hurly burley of public dialogue as in the more private registers of literary art.

The book's purpose should be considered from this bifocal perspective, alternating in scale and focus, but also converging, since the "low modernist" texts he chooses to examine as critical instances are also themselves exemplars of the rhetorical philosophy he is proposing we adopt for critical work. **[I]t** is this dual facing posture which gives the book its complexity. There is certainly justification for this entangling orientation to judgment; it is the circular relation that 20<sup>th</sup> century hermeneutic philosophy taught rhetoric to see in itself. This book is not a rehash of that familiar alliance, but rather a bold attempt to construe an even more eclectic braiding of interdisciplinary discourses. The profusion of partners that Jost brings into this idiosyncratic project feature most notably Wittgenstein and Richard McKeon as anchor-posts for an incredibly diverse cast of intellectual collaborators. One of the most consistent features of the book is its insistence on disciplinary pluralism, which Jost enacts by multiplying the voices of commentary, reflection, and invention. Thus the "intellectual orientation" Jost seeks to build as both all in all and more or less is characterized in great measure by this multi-voiced chorus of influences.

Before outlining the book's chapter structure, I want briefly **[to]** situate Jost's decision to wager this grand meta-rhetorical perspective, and say why he aims it at the genre of American low modernism. That Jost places rhetoric at the top of this expansive congerie is certainly a choice. I think it is fair to consider what he is doing here in the vein of what Deirdre McCloskey once called Big Rhetoric, "an intellectual orientation," he writes, for "approaching the whole world" (10). For him, "*thinking* like a rhetorician" means not simply adopting the instrumental skills of strategic persuasion but making our own its epistemic and

ontological battle-cries against the dominant positivist currents of Western rationalism (12). He believes that rhetoric as a disciplinary configuration is the most qualified by its very nature to lead this ungainly rag tag —because it takes "the intellectual and ethical and desiring-willful embodied being, a being 'thrown' into a more or less indeterminate world" — not only as its subject, but as its interlocutor (22). Moreover, rhetoric in its everyday application "traffics in the non-linear, intuitive, dynamic, and paradoxical values and qualities of experience" (224). Jost's vision of rhetoric is syncretic, reading the ancient rhetoricians and their postmodern theorists together: "Our own modern-day renaissance of rhetoric is Sophistic-Ciceronian-post-Humanist" (101). It is as a result a hybrid of Jost's own devising, grafting elements from each rather than simply mapping one on top of the other. He justifies this freedom by quoting Paulhan's and W. H. Auden's manifesto-like claim that it is proper to use "*any* method or device associated with *any* intellectual profile . . . for any problem" (288). Given this radical pluralism, it will strike some readers as surprising that many of the more recent modalities and registers of rhetoric studies are not brought into its braid (ecological, post-human, gender diverse, colonialist, etc.). Jost's response would probably be that the model he provides is in itself infinitely expandable. It might actually be a useful test to see if it can accommodate these more recent strands of the rhetorical weave that he offers.

Needless to say, the stakes for Jost's ambitious rhetoricality bleed over into the philosophical realm. In its **onto-epistemic** boundary-crossing, the neat categorical divisions between theory and practice, theory and criticism, and rhetoric and philosophy are made porous, brought into question, and hallucinate their conventional borders. Such disciplinary perspectives, in his view, ought "to be mixed and matched in discursive thought in probably an infinite number of ways" (10). The one

control for this profusion he accepts is one of proximity and affiliation—in the vein of Wittgenstein, a certain family-resemblance.

**Low modernism as a literary genre is not Jost's invention**, but he gives it his own stamp. In the wake of the tidal wave of cultural criticism against the elitist presumption of high art and literature, critics such as **Robert Scholes used the term** to show the capacious moral, aesthetic and tonal range of literary modernisms. Jost's contribution is to show how these more modest registers of literary modernism that he finds native to its American expression are especially congenial with the practical, home-made, **rough-hewn** tools of the philosophical and rhetorical schools he is advocating. Jost references his own words from a previous book to summarize this goal: “[**M**]ind and method are the first to create an alternative American low modernist lyric composed from everyday conversational materials taken for granted by everyone else. These materials and methods are steeped in the conventions of the ordinary, in our form of life and its [always] emerging and disappearing common sense, whose grammar and logic and dialectic have been rhetoricized in a thoroughly modern[ist] manner” (33). Low modernism is in effect the literary companion of disciplinary rhetoric; that is, of the values, conventions, and aesthetics belonging to that community of scholars and teachers who for millennia have nurtured the rhetorical arts and promoted their dignity, power, and utility. American low modernism, in Jost's view, is also a fitting companion to rhetoric's status marginality. Against “the high modernist desire to transcend the superfluity of words for some supposed purity of observation, thought, and insight,” Jost proposes an alliance with the outcast rhetoric and a democratically inflected philosophical pragmatism (296).

*All in All* is divided in three parts, and these parts appear to divide in the standard way as perspective, **method**, and criticism, but in keeping with its entire spirit, the book is written to trouble that straight-forward compartmentalization. All three parts interweave their functions all the way through. The thematic functions do, **however**, provide enough of an identity to summarize

their basic thrust. In the first part, Jost's perspective takes its biggest cut at conventional disciplinarity by treating rhetoric as an ontology in which language serves as the medium "through which communication and community circulate," a move that takes Jost's boundary-crossing to the level of being. Rather than remaining in their assigned places, agent and instrument commingle and co-constitute each other (61). They do so in commonplace reasoning forming out of historically contingent, situationally adaptive, socio-linguistic practices. Jost's adoption of what he identifies with the "new rhetoric" movement of the mid-twentieth century is more focused on argumentational idioms than cultural production. The collaboration of authors and works he sites [= cites] most frequently blend his "rhetorical philosophy" with American pragmatism, ordinary language criticism, continental theory, and low modernist poetics to yield a "ruly and unruly" form of linguistic judgment (116, 192).

Four influences stand at the forefront of Jost's pluralist perspective. Wittgenstein's linguistic pluralism will be the most familiar, and his pragmatic voice rings throughout the book. The architectonic rhetoric of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century University of Chicago philosopher Richard McKeon, a figure who has fallen quite far out of view from contemporary rhetorical studies, holds up the rhetorical torch for Jost. **McKeon's** orientation was deeply pluralist, but his main innovation was the attempt to return rhetoric to its classical place as a supra-disciplinary meta-language. Two other philosophers step forward; Richard Rorty, and his student Robert Brandom. Brandom receives a large portion of Jost's attention, mainly because he uses Brandom to build a systematic apparatus of rhetorical judgment. Brandom moves philosophy after the linguistic turn toward a natural holism that suits Jost's sense of rhetoric's potential as a grounded pragmatic instrument of judgment. Readers who are not familiar with Brandom's work may find Jost's introduction stimulating.

The book's second part shifts from developing a theoretical perspective to developing specific instruments of judgment, categorized appropriately as topics and tropes. So, **for example,**

Jost invokes low modernist writing on **[in?]** the existential category of “terror” (analogous to the Kantian notion of the sublime) in a way that illustrates the “in-between” onto-logic that crosses the boundaries of invention, interpretation, and public communication. Jost explains how topics work as vernacular seats of argument, which he illustrates right away with low modernist exemplars (e.g., an Elizabeth Bishop short poem, Jean Paulhan’s literary criticism). Jost spends much of this section probing closely how topical reasoning works on a textual level, and his close examinations here could very well stand on its own as valuable introductions to topical reasoning. As he does this, Jost folds in an ambitious range of theorists from Aristotle and Gadamer to Stanley Cavell and David **Bohme [= David Bohm]**.

The last sub-section of this second part (entitled “Consequence”) becomes a final summation of the theoretical import of Jost’s paradigm proposal for rhetoric as the preeminent humanist **form of** argument. It might serve as **[a]** good stand-alone excerpt of the book: a useful summation of Jost’s pluralist, multi-disciplinary, fluid rhetorical hierarchy. It gathers together a number of the key figures and themes Jost wishes to draw upon for his eclectic curation of rhetoric as the rough ground of a humanist perspective.

The third and last section of *All in All* organizes itself around major criticisms of the literary genre of American low modernism. The first of these chapters, as though to underscore Jost’s commitment to the average-ordinary values of the genre, is an analysis of the argument styles of the 1950s movie classic *12 Angry Men*. This Henry Fonda-lead **[=led]** feature film adaptation of a 1954 teleplay comes out of the mass-market Hollywood system and operates plainly in the register of the popular rhetoric of its time. Since the movie plot is nothing more nor less than a fictional jury deliberation, it features public argument in the plain style as its preeminent mode of narrative exposition. The characters in the movie are literally arguing with each other, deploying commonplace strategies, displaying a variety of stylistic and compositional skills, and most of all,

finding exhibiting [**? Should be one word or the other, probably exhibiting**] the full range of practical reasoning skills that non-expert citizens must summon in the improvised setting of a jury room. Jost's analysis focuses mostly on the characters' unconscious use of the *techne* [= *techne*] of classical rhetorical argument. Jost goes to some lengths in the first half of the chapter to make the case for works such as *12 Angry Men* as low modernist texts "for the use they have in our life" (412). The movie's fusion of popular narrative form and public oral argument serves as an exemplary instance for just such a modality of generic pluralism—its "mood" in the Heideggerian sense—as a proper performative subject and object of philosophical rhetoric.

The next chapter of this section on Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* engages its problematic position in literary criticism precisely as a low rather than high modernist text. Wharton was acutely conscious of the narrative challenge for a work whose protagonists were, in her words, "granite outcroppings . . . half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate" (quoted in Jost 467). Her problem was how to develop the story of these mute protagonists into a narrative "whole." The central void in Ethan Frome's life, a void complementing his want of expression, was that between the life he gave up and the life he had, and she had to find a way to make this void dramatic. The way she did this was to hold and play with the mystery of his recalcitrant voice to the very end, thus dramatizing the very thing that created the narrative problem. In this context Jost raises the notion of a narrative "subject" for reflection—a concept that can span fluidly the various perspectives of matter and form, character, author, and audience—and with *Frome* this fluidity encourages the exchange of subject positions that bridge the divides of class, expressive eloquence, and narrative identity. Using what he calls "gap-analytics", Jost discovers a dramatic unity between the silence of the protagonist and the eloquence of the novel, a fitting unity for a low modernist rhetoric.

The next chapter critique [**drop "critique"?**] brings the grammatical-rhetorical dimensions of Jost's hybrid lens to bear on the *poetic* text—in this case Elizabeth Bishop's 1976 verse [**?? drop**

**Verse]** poem “Crusoe in England.” Jost finds the imaginative resources of a literary sensibility, the rhetorical resources of argument, and the philosophical resources of reflection blended in the poetic act itself, most notably here in Bishop’s narrative protagonist, Crusoe. For his critical approach to the text, Jost invokes Angus Fletcher’s *A New Theory for American Poetry* for authority in blending Bishop’s multi-vocal registers under the master category of “thinking,” that is, thinking as “conceiving, imagining, fancying, and envisaging . . . reflecting musing, meditating . . . deliberating, speculating, reasoning, and inferring” (Fletcher quoted in Jost, 505). Bishop’s poem lends itself particularly well to this genre-grafting experiment because it so clearly has the ambition to work across normally divided modes. Her poem is an exemplar of a literary text that does its own radical category mixing—philosophical and poetic, analytic and critical, rhetorical and grammatical—blending discourse across disciplinary boundaries—in its “rational, considering quality,” its “‘crossed’ concepts,” its “non-figurative” analogies, and in toto “picturing *different* kinds of data in *multiple* possible ways” (559, 564, 559). A low modernist discourse, one could say, knows and respects such boundaries less. The poem’s diverse work of suspension, realization, mediation, wonder, contrariness, and contradiction makes “Crusoe in England” a tour de force [***tour de force?***] of anti-disciplinary miscegenation. Jost’s own commentary is an effort to specify and locate the poem’s modal mixtures within and evaluate its success as an instrument for Fletcher’s taxonomy. The wide-ranging critical analysis of this chapter is, by comparison with the previous two chapters, quite broad and adventurous. Mixing genres of analysis themselves in this way expands his larger pluralist palette—pluralism of subject, of perspective, of critical style.

For the next chapter, Jost grafts traditions dating back to the medieval grammarians, whose art could compete with rhetoric and logic, [**and?**] with Kenneth Burke, who placed grammar on the level of human action, thought, and motivation. Here grammar and rhetoric are in dialectical conversation as, respectively, a rule-governed art of sense-making, and the inventional adaptation of

these rules to the peculiarities of specific human situations. Jost wants to use this pair as an instrument of literary criticism, again with the full amplitude of their philosophical potential. His literary illustration in this chapter is Elizabeth Bishop's 1955 short poem "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," a work which provides neither of its titular promises, but works instead, in Jost's view, as itself an "exemplary model of inquiry, argument, interpretation, and judgment" (553). The disappointments of world travel inspire Bishop's religious meditation. The poem instructs the reader in how to see this disenchanted world, providing grammatical rules and rhetorical models in a stereoscopic vision, toggling between randomized reality and an ordered hope. Thus the grammatical and rhetorical modes of poetry and criticism seem to assume a pedagogical function here, although the lesson reaches to metaphysical heights in the struggle to make the two sides of a stereoscopic vision cohere. The resources of medieval rhetoric and grammar being already ontological in nature, Bishop (and Jost) think through the power of analogy as *analogia entis*. The risk of putting such a transcendent analogy for a secular poet is what reveals the disorder of the modern mind. Here the barnyard scramble of rhetoric vies with the rule-bound order of the world's hopeful grammar. Jost takes us through the radical transformation that rhetoric works upon the figural schemas of Bishop's sensibility, a logic of indeterminate possibility, or possibility that resists absolutism and nihilistic relativism.

This is Chapter 11, the last of the case studies, but the chapter also serves as the book's conclusion. Such a nesting or tucking of the book's conclusion in the critical section is noteworthy. With a project that has such a wide scope of ambition as both theory and criticism, one would normally expect a summary chapter weaving all the threads together, but what Jost is signaling in this structural choice is that theory and criticism cannot be cleanly disentangled, nor one privileged over the other. The way in which each of the case study chapters enacts this braided function reinforces this point.

I make no pretense of having summarized the dense richness of the critical engagements in the criticism chapters; they are each full-blown interrogations of their literary objects as illustrations of the intertwined and composite discourse methods which Jost is asking us to make our own. He remains throughout radically interdisciplinary not only in weaving strands of philosophy, literature, criticism, and rhetoric into a hybrid lens of literary analysis, but is also including the literary models themselves in this multi-leveled discourse. His intention is not to trap us in some through-the-looking-glass experience of mirroring texts; the invitation is very much in keeping with the hermeneutic principle that there is no pure outside for understanding, and that the dialogic nature of human discourse goes all the way down, preventing us from separating the critical from the poetic or philosophical act. If nothing else one has to be impressed by the scale of the book's theoretical ambition, the capaciousness of the literary universe, and the richness of the critical interpretations. It continues the good work of promoting the much-abused and -neglected discipline of rhetoric as something more than a strategic instrument of public persuasion; whether it will ever win the architectonic heights Jost proposes, his book serves as a testimony to a vibrant history and identity that continues to evolve and challenge the disciplinary status quo.