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Rhetoric Review Volume 32, Number 1, January 2013. 99-101

As Peter Elbow embarks on his fifth decade as a central contributor the national conversation on writing pedagogy, his new book—Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can

Bring to Writing (Oxford UP, 2012)—is at once no surprise at all and also a colossal surprise. On one hand, Elbow's role in this discussion, since the 1973 publication of Writing Without

Teachers, is historic, and most would agree that his contribution to the field of Composition is analogous in scope to Kenneth Burke's contribution to Rhetoric. And so the new book isn't much of a surprise, for Elbow seems always to be delivering to writing teachers something thoughtful and useful. Surely, no one currently active in the field has any personal memory of a time when Elbow wasn't. On the other hand, who would have predicted that Elbow's latest work would be his most ambitious, his most theoretically sophisticated, and quite possibly his most significant?

<u>Vernacular Eloquence</u> differs from Elbow's earlier books. As he notes in the introduction, when he wrote <u>Writing Without Teachers</u>, he wasn't concerned about scholarly audiences, nor even people linked with schools, though in later works he did address more directly those who teach composition courses. With the new one, however, he is not only reaching toward all of the aforementioned readers—teachers, scholars, and those in the culture at large who are trying to write—but also to the general intellectual community of the sort one might associate with <u>The New Yorker</u>. This book, as is always the case with Elbow's work, features an abundance of practical wisdom about writing, but—and this is perhaps the boldest new development in Elbow's

career—the book also showcases Elbow's capacity to work as an historian, as a languagephilosopher, and as an insightful of observer of contemporary society and of the some of the changes that are defining life in our time.

One of the great beauties of Elbow's new book is the deft balance it strikes between the complexity of its erudition and the simplicity of its structure. The book is divided neatly into four parts. In the first, Elbow explains the particular things that speech, at its best, can be and do, and also what writing, at its best, can be and do; in the second part, he explains how speech can help one generate language in the early phases of the writing process; in the third, he explains how it can figure in the final phases of the writing process as a guide to revision; in the fourth section, he sets forth the notion of vernacular eloquence—first, by exploring the problems inherent in a too rigid notion of Edited American English, and then by exploring what he sees as a newly emerging culture of literacy in which elements of various versions of spoken English will prove acceptable within important, formal sorts of writing.

Elbow doesn't shy way from the politics implicit here: the traditional notion of literacy opposes itself to speech, and in so doing, has functioned as though it were a plot against "the spoken voice, the human body, vernacular language, and those without privilege" (7). He continues, "[traditional notions of literacy] make it harder than necessary for people to become comfortably, powerfully literate" (7).

This turn toward the ideological will surprise those accustomed to criticize Elbow for what they describe as his naïve, vague, outmoded, apolitical romanticism. Of course, those charges missed altogether the intensely political implications of his early work. When David Bartholomae famously thundered about how there is no such thing as writing without teachers,

his point, while part of a vogue in high, theoretical work that sought to expose the power of institutions, missed entirely the wider implication of both this theory and Elbow's work: the goal of exposing the power of institutions would serve to mitigate that power; and Elbow's early work sought precisely to give people the tools to become less beholden to institutions that did not necessarily have their best interests at heart. As he notes in <u>Vernacular Eloquence</u>, the seeds of this new book have lain dormant in his first work, and as he puts it, "I can now enrich my argument that teachers are not necessary for learning to write well." He adds, "In fact, institutional instruction can sometimes get in the way." (7). Elbow's focus on speech, moreover, allows him to define more precisely than ever the resource that, too often, his critics have miscast as his emphasis on the unteachable mystique of the individual voice.

Perhaps the most exciting new turn in Elbow's thought, however, emerges in what he calls "The Literacy Stories" that appear at the end of most chapters. These interludes show a dazzling range of erudition, tagging as they do, in just a few pages each, relevant digressions into historical moments that illustrate and support the concepts he advances in the main frame of his argument. Here is a representative sample of the titles of some of these interludes: "The Development of the Alphabetic Writing in the Middle East," "How Charlemagne and Alcuin Robbed Latin of Its Name," "How Early Standard English Was Born," "Another Successful Rhetorician in the Court of Queen Isabella," "Illegal Alphabets," "Three Countries With Competing Official Written Languages," and "Chairman Mao Tries to Make Literacy More Available to the Chinese."

In addition to these marvelous set-pieces between the chapters, Elbow also offers separate, gray-boxed digressions within chapters where he traces the implications of some particular turn of thought at a length and with an elegance that would not be possible in footnotes.

The effect of both these gray-boxed digressions and the "Literacy Stories" is a rich, layered reading experience, one with considerable options: you can skip the gray-boxed passages or not, read some and skip others, and do the same with the "Literacy Stories." In short, what Elbow presents here is an intellectual feast.

But, again, the explicit politics of all of this is what, finally, is most exciting. In the last section of the book, Elbow explores the way the culture of proper literacy tries to exclude speech (this, in fact, is the title of chapter seventeen) and, in turn, those for whom speech is a dominant resource in social and political lives. He then closes his book with a chapter that forecasts a new culture of vernacular literacy that will reflect what will be, in essence, a more just society.

There will always be those predisposed to attack Elbow, and this fact is one of the signals of the sheer stature he has achieved over the span of nearly a half-century. But how many of those detractors could have predicted that, on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of his first book's publication, he would release an entirely new volume of over four hundred pages that is at once more philosophically rigorous, more historically nuanced, and more socially engaged than any of his preceding works – and that still delivers the sort of deeply refreshing, commonsensical, practical wisdom about the writing process that has become synonymous with his name?