Appendix

Why Wayne Booth Can’t Get with the Program; or, The Nintentional Fallacy

This essay is a rather different experiment with the form of the critical essay from the one undertaken in chapter 9. Its success or failure rides at least as much on the handling of voice as on the specific critical principles being explored. In any event, since the dominant voice here belongs to one Jonathan Allen rather than to the “I” of these headnotes and the “I” of all the previous essays, it might be a welcome change for all of you who have let that “I” speak into your ears for lo, these many pages.

A couple of weeks ago, while I was in the throes of drafting a paper about the significant alterations in Wayne Booth’s thinking implied by his developing the concept of coduction in *The Company We Keep*, I received a rather amazing letter. As soon as I read it, I realized that it contained a far more appropriate assessment of Booth’s evolving thoughts about the relations between authors, texts, and readers than anything my lugubrious analysis would yield. This letter, as you’ll see, is far from unqualified praise of Booth, but I believe it gets at aspects of his work that a more reverential approach would just plain miss.
Dear Professor Phelan:

You probably don’t know who I am, though I did receive a little notoriety among members of the MLA back in 1986 when *College English* published the text of a talk I gave to the Executive Council. As president of the Madison Avenue Advertising Board, I proposed that the MLA support the Board’s idea of using well-known fictional characters to endorse commercial products. (Becky Sharp for MasterCard and Abel Magwitch for True Value Hardware Stores [“A True Value file is a real pip”] were two of my favorites.) Of course those stodgy Council members weren’t, shall we say, buying, so we never launched the campaign. Despite that disappointment, I haven’t abandoned my quest to put literary studies in the center of our national consciousness by linking them to popular culture. And just recently, I’ve had my Breakthrough Insight. Like the Canon automatic camera, my thinking is so advanced it’s simple. As one of my humanities professors once said, it’s all a matter of formulating the right question. As soon as I asked, what are the hottest things going in literary study and in children’s popular culture, I knew how Lily Briscoe felt when she saw how to finish her painting. Theory and Nintendo: revolution via the computer; turn interpretation into a Nintendo game and transform the nation’s consciousness. Students of America, liberate that signifier, but beware the mise-en-abyme; explore different levels of signification; uncover the cultural code, find the magic theme, and rescue the princess Meaning. Move over, Super Mario Brothers; here come Nina Baym and Wayne Booth. Move over, Nintendo Entertainment Systems; here comes Ucando Interpretation Schema.

My research and development team—a half-dozen recent Ph.D.s who did dissertations in critical theory but couldn’t find teaching jobs—has already developed several schema in the few short months of our operation, including the one that I expect to be our hottest seller, “PC or Not PC?” But the reason that I’m writing to you is that we’ve gotten stuck with the one based on Booth’s theory, tentatively entitled “The Wayne Dance.” The research team is getting pretty fed
up and one of them has been complaining that Booth isn’t worth all the trouble he’s been giving us—“he’s not, you know, what I’d call poststructuralistically trendy.” To be honest, I’m getting pretty frustrated myself—after all, I’ve got a cultural revolution to get under way here—but I’m not quite ready to give up: I seem to have a soft spot in my heart for the unreliable narrator. I called Booth for advice, but, frankly, he was no help at all. I was shocked to learn that he’d never even heard of Nintendo let alone played it: I guess they don’t make Renaissance men like they used to. He did, however, recommend I write to you—“Phelan’s weird enough to get into this” was what he said.

Let me describe the basic setup and one of our successes so you can get a better idea of what we’d like to do with “The Wayne Dance.” The first screen in every schema shows a figure (or two, if you are playing against someone) at one end of a landscape. The figures, whom we call His and Her Meneut, remain the same from schema to schema but the landscape always varies. In the deconstructionist game, for example, it’s a well-planned neighborhood, with carefully tended gardens, symmetrical houses, a well-organized downtown. In “PC or Not PC?” it’s the interior of a church: the Meneut figure stands at the back and looks down the aisle at the people filling the pews on the left and the right, shouting back and forth at each other. The object of the game is to advance across the landscape to some designated desirable point. To play, you run the light of a scanning pen over whatever text you select and then answer the questions that appear on the screen. With every question you answer, the Meneut figure advances a few steps into the landscape, and sometimes the landscape itself gets transformed and reconfigured around her.

Let’s say that the text is Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” and you’re playing the deconstructionist game, “Always Already Aporia!” The object of the game is to break down the orderliness of the initial landscape until you reach a point where you can no longer tell which way to move because all lines of differentiation between the gardens, roads, houses, suburbs, and downtown get lost. You begin by using the scanning pen to read the first paragraph into the game’s memory:

“The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well
know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redheadresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.”

Then the following question appears on the screen: “In this text which are the apparently privileged terms, insult or injury; revenge or retribution?” If you select insult and revenge, then a new screen appears in which His Meneut has advanced a little into a landscape that is losing its order: the gardens are no longer neatly rectangular; the roads now wind and vary in length. To get to the final point of aporia, you have to answer correctly a whole series of questions that lead you to see that the apparently privileged terms are in fact dependent on the subordinate ones: Montresor’s vengeful insults to Fortunato have their power because they are prelude to the ultimate injury—murder. Montresor, indeed, has his revenge, but his revenge also has him, and it is his having him that produces this text, a text that simultaneously boasts of his successful revenge and testifies by its very existence to the way retribution has overtaken him. Pretty neat, huh? A few weeks ago I thought a privileged term was what you used to refer to the queen of England; now I’m ready to challenge J. Hillis Miller to a game of “Always Already.” Imagine what the Nintendo generation will do with our schema.

Frankly, though, our success with deconstruction makes me more frustrated and impatient with Booth. We had no trouble selecting a landscape—an elegant, albeit somewhat crowded, dance floor. We also decided to introduce a third figure into the schema, one we’ve named Implied Arthur—A-r-t-h-a for the female version. Our idea was this: at the beginning of “The Wayne Dance” Her Meneut and Arthur would be at opposite sides of the floor; as the scanner read the text, music would start to play and the other figures on the floor would begin to dance. As the player answers questions correctly, Her Meneut and Arthur would start to move around the other figures and objects on the floor, trying ultimately to reach a meeting point in the
exact center, where they would then dance together. Their meeting would trigger new music and their dance would go on as long as the player desired. Sounds good, right?

Well, we can’t get anything to work. The first trouble we had was developing the schema so that it would differentiate between correct and incorrect answers to whatever questions we formulated. As usual, we used the computer to help develop the schema: we loaded all of Booth’s books into the computer’s memory and gave it a few instructions about organizing the material. But when we started trying out questions, the computer kept either getting hung up or allowing multiple answers. One of the researchers finally suggested that we erase Critical Understanding from the memory—“That pluralist claptrap about multiple validity messes up the computer’s binary operations.” Then someone else said we should probably also erase Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent—“I’m afraid that now we have a program whose first impulse is to say yes to every answer.” Sure, sure, I said, just get me a game that works. But they still haven’t.

Take the first paragraph of Poe again. It’s easy enough to program the game to recognize the first-person pronoun and then generate the question, “Is the Narrator reliable?” What we can’t do is program the game to recognize whether yes or no is a better answer: there just doesn’t seem to be anything in Poe’s language that settles the matter. We also are at our wit’s end with the problem of how to handle irony: there doesn’t seem to be any surefire trigger even to produce the question, never mind getting the machine to distinguish between answers. If you don’t mind my saying so, I’m starting to suspect that all Booth’s work is just rhetorical voodoo. When I came in this morning, I had this memo from one of the researchers on my desk.

“I think I’ve figured out why we can’t do The Wayne Dance. Despite his reputation as an old Chicago School formalist, all Booth’s work finally depends on matters that are not actually available in the formal features of texts. Deciding whether a narrator is reliable or unreliable, whether an utterance is ironic or nonironic, whether a third-person narrator is a dramatization of an authorial self or of a different persona—none of these decisions can be made only by pointing to the text. In every case, Booth is talking about the communication of
values and beliefs through language—and through what language doesn’t say. He’s talking about how authors imply their values and how readers infer those values, and though he tries like hell in the *Irony* book and elsewhere to make those processes intelligible, it’s clear that in his view there are no immutable rules for understanding them. Amazingly, though, he believes more firmly that this kind of communication occurs than that he or anyone else will be able to explain it adequately. I think his faith is romantic tosh—but I know, I know, mine’s not to reason why / mine’s just to program and sigh. Anyway, maybe if I just focus on *The Company We Keep*, I can figure out something.”

Wait, here’s the same guy with another memo… Worse news.

“I thought that junk from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *A Rhetoric of Irony* was hard to work with. This stuff in *Company* is impossible. What’s more, if we take it seriously we have to redesign the whole game. Coduction changes everything. Booth’s reader doesn’t just dance with the author anymore. She dances with other readers, too, so we’d have to have all the figures moving in relation to each other. Yet, they shouldn’t all be doing the same dance, and indeed, they shouldn’t all be hearing the same music. Booth’s thinking seems to go something like this: if decisions about understanding are difficult, decisions about values are even more so. But like the effort and the process involved in understanding, the effort and process involved in evaluating are crucial for human life and for the communities in which we live. In *Company*, Booth’s own ethical commitment to rhetorical community is even stronger than his commitment to understanding the absent author. In retrospect, his evolution to this position seems inevitable—there are just a few seeds of it in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *A Rhetoric of Irony*—but those seeds are developing into roots in *Modern Dogma* and *Critical Understanding*. The rationale behind his recommendation to assent to another’s argument until having reasons not to and the rationale behind his choice of a pluralism based on vitality, justice, and understanding are essentially the same: the practices that follow from these commitments will enhance the lives of those who meet in intellectual exchange of whatever kind.

Anyway, in *Company* Booth testifies that his dancing with other readers has made him able to make moves on the floor that he’d never have been able to do with just himself and the author. His dancing is a
lot messier than it used to be, and he often doesn’t know when to stop, but he seems happier. Less uptight, more willing to be wrong, though oddly also more committed to the questions of ethical evaluation that got him into trouble in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Well, I’m glad he’s happier, but the whole thing seems crazier and crazier to me: does Booth really live in the postmodern, poststructuralist 1990s? I know, I know, you just care about getting the schema to work. I’m now convinced that there is no way to do that. It’s time to stop the music on ‘The Wayne Dance.’

Professor Phelan, is my man right? Is there any way to save “The Wayne Dance,” any way to keep Booth part of the coming revolution? Please reply as soon as possible. I’ll remember you when the revolution comes.

Urgently,

Jonathan Allen

My reply was short.

Dear Mr. Allen:

I think you have two choices: (1) make “The Wayne Dance” a game for two or more players and have the schema produce the same response at every juncture: “Read this carefully and then talk about it with your partners for as long as you want.” (2) Start the revolution without Booth; somehow I don’t think he’ll mind.

Sincerely,

James Phelan