Wayne Booth and the Ethics of Fiction

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Before Wayne Booth’s article “Kenneth Burke’s Way of Knowing” went to print, he had the opportunity to read Burke’s reaction. Burke’s response compelled Booth to add a “Postscript as Preface”: “When I received Kenneth Burke’s response to the following piece, I was distressed to find that what was intended as an encomium had given him pain” (1). It is my hope that my similar intention will not give Booth pain. The hazards of working on books that have become friends are many, as are the rewards. Friendship makes objectivity difficult; fortunately for me, Booth’s Rhetoric of Fiction makes the notion of authorial objectivity suspect (67–88). Therefore, I will proceed as if with impunity to gather together and test what I find to be Booth’s most helpful heuristic questions concerning the ethics of fiction. These questions are fully realized in Booth’s recent book The Company We Keep, but they are also predicted by passages in his earlier works. Not surprisingly, these questions echo concerns implicit in the direction of recent ethical philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre characterizes the current climate in ethical philosophy this way: “The controversy between emotivism and prescriptivism on the one hand and their critics on the other expresses the fundamental moral situation of our own society” (Short History of Ethics 266). The move away from prescriptive ethics and toward descriptive inquiry in ethical philosophy acts as an invitation for literary criticism to reclaim areas it previously explored, this time with new rigor. Booth, as both literary critic and rhetorician, accomplishes this evaluation in a much more helpful way than do others interested in the ethics of rhetoric, such as Richard Weaver and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. The primary difference lies in the questions each asks.
To test Booth's heuristic questions, I have selected a text that is my personal hobgoblin, Jean Genet's *Querelle*. To illustrate the difficulties that *Querelle* represents, we have only to look at the quotations provided by the critics on the book's jacket. The *New York Times* called this novel, "Genet's purest perverse romance." Michael Levenson writes that *Querelle* "drags us with [Genet] to a confrontation with the basest of angels." And Dotson Rader lauds the work for its "exquisite perversity of imagination." We might ask why this novel inspires such tropes. To put my anxiety about this text into Boothian terms, the most pressing concern may be the lack of distinction I find between the narrator, implied author, and even actual author—if we can trust Genet's self-appraisals. This novel provides us with exactly the kinds of ethical difficulties that can demonstrate the usefulness of Booth's mode of inquiry because this novel undercuts the very norms upon which the ethical systems of other rhetoricians are based. In short, Booth's questions succeed where others' fail. In *The Company We Keep*, as elsewhere, Booth reintegrates literary evaluation:

The blanket rejection of evaluation, especially in its ethical forms, ignores the variety of *kinds* of judgment that we in practice share. Many an appraisal may indeed be worthless to everyone except the appraiser; but once we make some elementary distinctions, we discover that some appraisals qualify as shared knowledge, no more dubious than many a "factual" claim. (83)

In order to be more specific, I have gathered together ten representative questions that suggest Booth's mode of inquiry.

1. What are the distinctions between the narrator, the implied author, and the actual author?
2. Is the text ironic?
3. Should I believe the narrator?
4. Am I willing to be the kind of person the storyteller is asking me to be?
5. Would I admit this author into the circle of my true friends?
6. What are the text's implicit norms?
7. To what extent do readers take in the values of what they read?
8. Has something been achieved that is in its own terms admirable?
9. Has some gift or skill been exhibited here that those who see and accept its implicit standards will admire?
10. What is the judgment community in which the text exists?
Though reductive of Boothian inquiry, this list suggests some prime ingredients and preserves Booth’s emphasis on how we know things about a text and what constitutes assent-worthy reasons for evaluation.

Though the saying goes that the proof is in the pudding, a recipe may be better tested by giving it to an apprentice than to the master chef, whose brilliance might cover the defects of the concoction. We already know that Booth can blend together the delicate flavors of *Emma* in a way that brings us back to the table for delicious discussion. *Querelle* is a tougher cut in less experienced hands. If the outcome of my inquiry is fit for consumption, so much the greater compliment to Booth.

The brand of rhetorical inquiry that leads us to Booth’s ethics of fiction is an outgrowth of what Booth has called “ecumenical rhetoric” (*Vocation* 309). Booth’s style of inquiry does not so much mend fences as remove entire walls between discourse communities represented by academic departments and critical methods. In his Ryerson Lecture (recounted in *The Vocation of a Teacher*), where he demonstrates how we can and do blend special and common topics with more intuitive judgments of ethos, and in *Critical Understanding*, where he follows competing critical methodologies to their problematic conclusions, we find an undercurrent of rigorous humanism. Loosely speaking, it is Booth’s program to give the humanities back to humans by wresting them from departments and dogmas. His attitude of critical glasnost, if you will, belies the notion that a rhetorical education is at best elitist and at worst sophistic because he seeks precision while resisting jargon, he demands assent-worthy evidence while scrutinizing unargued assertion, and he renews lines of ethical inquiry while repudiating shortsighted calls for censorship. In short, in Booth’s hands the ethics of fiction is a testing ground for a new rhetorical sensitivity that both raises hard questions and suggests rigorous and assent-worthy ways to answer them. This seems a simple enough proposition, but as he so clearly demonstrates in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, many critics have been asking questions born of prescriptive dogma that obscures difficulties in their reasoning, or have left their evaluations of texts’ ethical merits undefended. Both cases split the discourse community into those who agree with the dogma or the evaluation as they stand and those who do not.

In response, Booth asks us to provide reasoned judgments of texts (“Ethical Criticism” 279). His is a call to talk to rather than at each other. The value judgments we make are not assumed to be made in a vacuum; the discourse community is an integral part of the assessment: “... how do I argue for such value judgments about human beings, imagined ones at that? What must I do if someone disputes
my evaluation?” (Irony 215). In these arguments the ethical appeal of texts is not underrated. He asks us to explore the values implicit in literary works by examining the way these values are transmitted to us: “Should I believe this narrator? Am I willing to be the kind of person that this storyteller is asking me to be? Will I accept the author among the small circle of my true friends?” (“Ethical Criticism” 289–290). The questions Booth asks of imagined human beings, narrators, and authors are all eventually asked of the critical community. “The question in appraising wholes, given their intentions, will always finally be, Has something been achieved here that is in its own terms admirable? Has some gift or skill been exhibited here that those who see and accept its implicit standards will admire?” (Company 111). Booth stresses the idea that we people our lives with the authors we read, calling friendship with books “a neglected critical metaphor” (“George Eliot” 4). If we do, as Booth argues, “underestimate the extent to which we take in the values of what we read,” (“George Eliot” 291) then the stakes are high. The Company We Keep reminds us that the metaphor of book as friend is central to the questions Booth asks of literature. In practice, often the most deceptively simple questions produce complex answers. We would do well to take seriously a question Booth once posed to fourth graders: “How do you tell the good guys from the bad guys?” (Rhetoric of Fiction 457).

These questions seem simple only until we contrast them with other systems intended to help us make reasonable statements about ethical dimensions in rhetorically crafted texts. Booth asks us how we tell. Richard Weaver, in The Ethics of Rhetoric, suggests a system based on a different sort of questioning. Though Weaver is addressing himself not specifically to fiction but to argumentation, the difference in approach is not determined by genre so much as philosophy. In fact, Booth’s approach proves helpful for both fiction and arguments concerning it. In a highly prescriptive fashion, Weaver suggests that a speaker is ethical who demonstrates four qualities:

1. the quality displaying the speaker as seeking mutual agreement with his audience
2. the quality displaying the speaker as recognizing the rational autonomy of the speaker
3. the quality displaying the speaker as recognizing the equality of the listener with himself
4. the quality displaying the speaker as recognizing that the ends of the audience have an intrinsic value for him (102)
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The four qualities could be seen as a carefully rendered golden rule for rhetoric or, as the philosopher Henry Johnstone called it, the rule of bilateral argument: "A rhetor may use no device of persuasion that he could not in principle permit others to use on him" (101). It would seem that it should not matter whether the rhetor in question is an actual person or a character in fiction; for certain types of rhetorical situations perhaps it does not.

That these rules have limited power for criticism of discourse like that of Genet's becomes clear when we test them against *Querelle*. In general, we could say that all of Genet's works violate all of these rules in some way. Genet said in an interview that he does not seek our agreement, actively seeks to manipulate the audience, holds himself superior, and places no value on anything outside himself (Fichte 178–90). He receives an "F" on these prescriptive tests. But this failure does little to give us an answer to Sartre's famous defense of Genet:

I know what can be said: "Let him write, if he wants to, but we don't have to read him. His poems are premeditated crimes, he tries to base his salvation on our destruction and to trick us by means of words. These are excellent reasons for admiring his works from afar and not for buying them."

I admit that Genet treats his readers as means. He uses them all to talk to himself about himself, and this peculiarity may alienate readers. When he asks himself: "Should I steal?" Why should he expect the answer to interest us? "What I write," says Genet, "is valid only for me." To which the public replies: "What I take the trouble to read should at least be valid for everyone. Let him preach theft! One could at least discuss the matter, could take a stand for or against his views." But he does not say that one should steal. Quite the contrary, he knows that it is wrong to steal and it is in order to be wrong that he steals. But he does not even ask us to be wrong: he asks us nothing at all. If anyone planned to become his disciple, I'm sure he would answer: "How could anyone act like me if he's not me?" This poet "speaks to us as an enemy." (628–29)

Sartre's argument is based on a different perception of authorial intention from that which Weaver and Johnstone imply. We arrive at an impasse. But there are ways, following Booth's example, that we might critique Sartre's defense. First, Sartre does not give us assent-worthy reasons to believe that he can be sure of Genet's answer to the questions we might pose; as it turns out, Genet says many things to the contrary
in his writings and interviews (Fichte 180–90; Genet, *Journal* passim). Second, we could argue, after examining how Genet’s rhetoric functions, that Genet does expect our interest and, beyond that, is asking us to be “wrong” and implies that we already are.

To illustrate these claims, I turn to Genet’s *Querelle*. A taste of the novel’s beginning reveals that this work was prepared under a system different from the one implied by the prescriptive “rules” of Weaver and Johnstone, or even from the position described by Sartre. Genet, through his narrative technique, actively seeks to break rules such as theirs and to take us with him. *Querelle* begins:

The notion of murder often brings to mind the notion of sea and sailors. Sea and sailors do not, at first appear as a definite image—it is rather that “murder” starts up a feeling of *waves*. If one considers that seaports are the scene of frequent crimes, the association seems self-explanatory; but there are numerous stories from which we learn that the murderer was a man of the sea—either a real one, or a fake one—and if the latter is the case, the crime will be even more closely connected to the sea. The man who dons a disguise relieves him from the necessity of going through all the rigamarole required in the execution of any preconceived murder. Thus we could say that the outfit does the following things for the criminal: it envelops him in clouds; it gives him the appearance of having come from that far-off line of the horizon where the sea touches the sky; with long, undulating and muscular strides he can walk across the waters, personifying the Great Bear, the Pole Star or the Southern Cross; it (we are still discussing the particular disguise, as used by the criminal) it allows him to assume dark continents where the sun sets and rises, where the moon sanctions murder under roofs of bamboo beside motionless rivers teaming with alligators; it gives him the opportunity to act with the illusion of a mirage, to strike while one of his feet is still resting upon a beach in Oceania and the other propelling him across the water toward Europe; it grants him oblivion in advance, as sailors always “return from far away”; it allows him to consider landlubbers as mere vegetation. It cradles the criminal, it enfolds him—in the tight fit of his sweater, in the amplitude of his bell-bottoms. It casts a sleep-spell on the already fascinated victim. We shall talk about the sailor’s mortal flesh. We ourselves have witnessed scenes of seduction. In that very long sentence beginning “it envelops him in clouds . . .,” we did indulge in facile poeticsisms, each one of the propositions being merely an argument in favor of the author’s personal proclivities. (3–4)
The narrator announces himself to be one and the same with the author, shows us his self-conscious control of his rhetoric, and even demonstrates a tendency to pass aesthetic judgments on his storytelling. Jacques Derrida described Genet's technique as "poisoning the flowers of rhetoric" (13). As readers, we have both witnessed a seduction and been its intended object. We must either enter into the narrator's perspective with its risks or find ourselves described as "mere vegetation" and thus victims. If we look closely at the narrator's initially strange connection between the sea and murder, we find not syllogistic reasoning but the repeated terms of a *gradatio* that mimics logical progression. Our benign willingness to make sense of the narrator's connections and Genet's masterful use of tropes allows this odd passage to track. Propelled by these curious linguistic links, his labyrinthine sentences, and sheer curiosity, the reader becomes enmeshed in the narrator's internal "logic" and becomes the referent, at least by implication, of the narrator's "we." There seems to be no charge on the words "criminal" or "murder" as the narrator uses them. Nor is there any detectable ironic undercutting of the norms the narrator builds into his "argument." In fact, we may strain our internal ear for the entire length of the novel for an implied author who in some way repudiates this narrator's values, but we will hear only silence.

By the end of the novel we find we have been keeping company with a narrator who condones a character who chooses to be a murderer, thief, drug dealer, corrupter, and traitor. The act of continuing to read has made us at least voyeuristic, if not complicit. As accessories, we have allowed ourselves to indulge the narrator's facile poeticisms, to witness scenes of seduction, and to hear arguments for the author's proclivities to the end. Above all, we have entered into a world of violence for at least the time it takes us to read the text. Genet has lived in that world for at least the time it took him to write it. This is as Genet would have it. In his autobiographical *A Thief's Journal*, Genet comments, "Such a definition of violence—through so many contradictory examples—shows you that I shall use words not in order to better describe an event or its hero but in order to provide instruction about myself. To understand me, complicity on the part of the reader is needed" (16). This complicity in his crimes against the community and even the idea of community is a means to secure in our breasts his dark, interior definition of beauty.

We aren't in Kansas anymore. This is the guy our mothers warned us about. Neither Genet nor *Querelle*’s implied author is our friend even
in the most tolerant conception of friendship. Genet shows us that there
is no honor among thieves even as he invites us to walk along the dock;
the seductions in *Querelle* lead to betrayal and murder.

There can be little consolation that this is a relatively isolated liter­
ary incident. In his article, “The Reason for Stories: Toward a Moral
Fiction,” Robert Stone takes on William Gass’s “proposition that art
and moral aspiration were mutually distant.” He sees in Gass’s position
an “antinomian vision, morality and art are independent and even in
opposition” (71).

But does this independence, should it be the case, exclude ethical
criticism? We might rightly ask if these texts, given that they do not
actually kill us, make us stronger. If truth is beauty, and Genet can
make a claim on either, we certainly are presented with some grist for
our critical mills. That these questions derive from Nietzsche is telling.
Maclntyre locates the modern controversy in ethical philosophy along
lines that are on the one hand Nietzschean and that on the other de­
erive from Aristotle. The Nietzschean contention rests on the idea of the
individual apart: “It is because this is so that the great man cannot enter
into relationships mediated by appeal to shared standards or virtues
or goods; he is his own only authority and his relationships to others
have to be exercises of that authority” (*After Virtue* 240). This position
is clearly anathema to Booth, but is quite like that of Genet. The com­
peting tradition is Aristotelian, and not surprisingly, quite similar to
Booth’s conception of the questions we ought to explore:

For if the conception of the good has to be expounded in terms of such
actions as those of a practice, of the narrative unity of human life and of
a moral tradition, then goods, and with them the only grounds for the
authority of laws and virtues, can only be discovered by entering into
those relationships which constitute communities whose central bond
is a shared vision and understanding of goods. To cut oneself off from
shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently as an ap­
prentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their
point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself to that moral
solipsism which constitutes Nietzschean greatness. Hence we have to
conclude not only that Nietzsche does not win the argument by default
against the Aristotelian tradition, but also, and perhaps more impor­
tantly, that it is from the perspective of that tradition that we can best
understand the mistakes at the heart of the Nietzschean position. (*After
Virtue* 240)
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The idea of looking at the narrative unity of life is akin to Booth’s questions of implicit norms; it exposes our assumptions as well as some texts’ deficiencies. Booth would have us look at the ethos present in the text; in *Querelle* we find the solipsism MacIntyre describes in the Nietzschean position. Here, too, this perspective exposes the mistakes in the heart of the novel’s position. Genet preys on our basic trust of the written word, our perhaps naive but customary assumption that authors are trying to do us some good (albeit their own definition of *good*), and our tendency as readers to give the benefit of the doubt to others as an extension of the way we give flexibility to the societal ties that bind us. Genet abuses these virtues of community in the attempt to pull us away from the very norms that allow communities to cohere.

But in an ironic twist not intended by the novel, Genet’s antisocial claims are undercut to some extent by the act of his writing and publishing them. Though he writes from a position of alienation, an actual jail cell, his act is communicative even while it is hostile, a kiss of death. Ultimately, he is unsuccessful in conveying the norms he espouses because to convey them he must communicate with us, rendering his position of isolation meaningless.

We are unlikely to allow Genet into the small circle of our close friends unless it is our custom to run with a very tough crowd. What our custom is has some relevance. Turning to Booth’s notion of reader’s ethics as it applies to me as the reader of *Querelle*, I find that this work reminds me of how very actively values are implied by all works. A dose of Genet makes the camouflaged values in other literary works closer to my own norms stand out in relief. Genet intends me no good, but reading *Querelle* does me some good. My perception of *Querelle* as an inherently inconsistent epistemology is, ironically, its value for me.

When I move from an evaluation of the novel as it affects me as one reader and write about it in this chapter, I open myself and the novel to the coductive process Booth describes in *The Company We Keep*. As my critique enters the larger discussion of the ethics of this novel with Sartre, Levenson, Rader, and others, it becomes an example of Booth’s premise that “judgement requires a community” (*Company* 72). My contributions are then judged in terms of the larger discussion. “The validity of our coductions must always be corrected in conversations about the coduction of others whom we trust” (*Company* 73).

Thus Booth can lead us to inquire about the nature of authorial and readers’ ethics and the interdependency of criticism itself. We are not limited by proscriptions to what an author *ought* to have done when he
or she, in fact, did something quite different. Instead, we are allowed the freedom to inquire beyond the customary boundaries of our predominant methods even into systems that stand in opposition. We are afforded this freedom because Booth's heuristic is relational and invites rhetorical description. By this I mean that by asking us to look at the relationship among authors, readers, and critics, as well as by asking us to examine how these relationships are accomplished and what they imply, Booth avoids the trap of judging one system only by another alien to it. His questions do not constitute some new foundationalism. MacIntyre would locate this approach in the Aristotelian tradition. Following MacIntyre, I would locate Genet in the Nietzschean. But unlike the positions of Richard Weaver or Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., these locations are not themselves the reason for the judgments made of the text. Belonging to the wrong club is not the reason for censure. That Booth's approach allows us to see this other tradition in relation to the one in which Booth works bodes well for increasing the availability of this sort of discourse to even competing critical communities.

Booth's recipe can be claimed a success because it has rendered Genet's *Querelle* digestible, if not particularly palatable. *Querelle* has a bitter aftertaste but also, for some, a hidden medicinal purpose. Booth's questions concerning how we are invited to partake and what sort of fare we are offered prove to be useful because they ask us to examine ingredients rather than assume them. We make fewer mistakes and reach fewer dead ends because we make fewer faulty assumptions about the norms implicit in texts or the range of values possible in people.

**Notes**

1. Genet is the first to admit that he sometimes lies in autobiographical writings and interviews. Booth, in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, deals with Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*. While that text has intricacies that bear some similarity to the difficulties I find in *Querelle*, those in Genet's novel are more pronounced because Genet does not claim to be at any distance from his narrator.


3. In his "Relevance of Rhetoric" Johnstone makes his position clear: "persuasion is responsible when it does not tend to degenerate. One must persuade only in such a way as to maintain the possibility of persuasion" (45). This
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Kantian approach relies on the idea that persuasion is of unquestionable value for a community. This communitarianism is foreign to Genet.

4. An earlier "clandestine" version of the original Querelle de Brest was circulated in French. Joseph H. McMahon, in his book The Imagination of Jean Genet (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963), translates some of this same opening passage from the clandestine version: "We have let ourselves go to a facile verbal poetry in which each proposition is nothing but an argument in favor of the authors complaisances. We want to present the drama which unfolds here under the sign of a quite striking inner movement. Furthermore we want to point out that it is addressed to perverts. To the idea of the sea and of murder is added the idea of delight and naturally of love—rather of unnatural love" (86–87).

5. See Company 41–42 for Booth's discussion of ethical dimensions of time spent reading.


Bibliography


