Most scholars who have silently suffered from hostile reviews, whether their critics were vapidly incomprehending or actively malevolent, have dreamed vengefully about being granted unlimited space to respond in print. Perhaps it is fortunate that few of us get the chance, because not many would use the occasion for anything better than a return bout with our detractors, whose ignorance or malice tends to be far less permeable than our own thin skins.

Wayne Booth is one of the lucky scholars who have been asked to reply to his own reviewers in a commissioned article for an academic journal; in fact, he has done so not once but twice, in essays spaced nearly ten years apart. True to what one might expect of a critic of his character as well as his stature, Booth eschewed the easy exercise in the countercheck quarrelsome, and used both *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and the *Poetics of Fictions* and *Three Functions of Reviewing at the Present Time* as occasions for discussing the critical scene, the way critics interact with and describe each other’s theories and judgments, and the difficulties of critical understanding.

But though one might describe these two essays in similar terms, they are different in tone as well as underlying philosophy: A close examination of the arguments would mark a change in what Booth expects as well as thinks possible in critical discourse, and we can see the results of that change in his subsequent books, both *Critical Understanding* and *The Company We Keep*. The shift is from what Booth himself,
in *Critical Understanding*, termed the “pluralism of discrete modes,” a position derived from the metatheories of R. S. Crane and the philosophical semantics of Richard McKeon, to a vision of contact through shared *topoi*. This vision in turn anticipates Booth’s adoption of a social version of the self as the locus of competing languages and characters, which is reminiscent of the ideas of Mikhail M. Bakhtin.

**Instrumental Pluralism**

Booth’s first stab at his reviewers is, rhetorically, a brilliant example of doublespeak, in that Booth bases a subtle ethical appeal upon his self-restraint in *not* doing several things that he characterizes as futile or self-indulgent (attacking his enemies, rewriting what was unclear about his book), and then does them anyway, but so indirectly that we may not realize what is being done.

The chief victim of Booth’s rhetoric is John Killham, whose “The ‘Second Self’ in Novel Criticism” in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* “attacked me for beliefs I had specifically repudiated, using arguments I myself had used” ("Rhetoric and Poetics” 106). Booth is first tempted to ignore Killham as “not worth bothering with,” then presents over six hundred words of invective, written at white heat, accusing Killham of distortions so gross and obvious that he has to appeal to malice rather than mere stupidity to explain them—a first draft that Booth allows us to read and savor before he pulls himself up short and repudiates the entire disputational enterprise.

Repudiates it, however, only to continue it by other means: part 2 of Booth’s article consists of an analysis of Killham’s mode of interpreting literature: the problems he sees as central, the critical terms he uses, and the methodology he employs.

Mr. Killham’s problem is that of reconciling what he calls the “autonomy” of a novel . . . with his knowledge that any novel is, after all, written and read by human beings; he seeks . . . a reconciliation between the autonomous “well-wrought urn” and the world of the author’s biography and psychology and intentions. . . . His talk is thus mostly in the expressive rather than the rhetorical mode. . . . [For Killham] true autonomy in a novel comes from our recognition of its independent “sense of life” which is, in fact, what the total creative act of the author, with his sense of life, gave it. (109)
As Booth goes on to demonstrate, there is no room within Killham's system—a dialectical method using the central principle of "expression"—for the sort of inquiry Booth is engaged in, or indeed for any inquiry using the problematic method and the principle of rhetoric. For Killham, "rhetoric" is a pejorative term—what inferior novelists are forced into using when they cannot fully develop their "sense of life"; for Booth, of course, it is an inescapable aspect of narrative technique—almost another name for technique. He presents Killham's critical enterprise seriously and sympathetically, and then suavely interposes: "It is easy to see that no author holding Mr. Killham's views uncritically—that is, without thinking through their implications for method—could possibly grasp my way of going about things . . ." (109).

In eristic terms, Booth understands Killham to death, by reading Killham so much better—and so much more generously—than Killham had bothered to read him. Killham indeed stands convicted, neither of mental incapacity nor of malice, but of something much worse: of holding his views so tightly that he has become incapable of grasping another kind of argument—incapable of learning from anyone who thinks differently than he does.¹

What Booth demonstrates in his rhetorical victory over Killham (and, implicitly, over all the other detractors who failed to understand the implications of his methodology) is the power of "instrumental pluralism" (Booth's term for the pluralism of his mentor, Ronald Crane): the notion that different critics have worked in discrete critical "languages" or "methods," each capable of its own powers and limitations, each a characteristic mode of insight with its own characteristic forms of blindness. Crane had demonstrated, in The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry, how a question such as, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" may be meaningless within the formalist New Critical approach of L. C. Knights (in which poetry is seen as a pure symbolic structure), but perfectly apt within the mimetic criticism of A. C. Bradley (in which literary characters are seen as imaginative analogues of real persons).

Both Crane's insight into Knights's meaningless quarrel with Bradley and Booth's insight into Killham's meaningless quarrel with him (Booth) derive directly or indirectly from instrumental pluralisms such as the philosophical semantics of Richard McKeon, who viewed arguments between rival philosophers as derivable from differences in their prior choices of method, principle, organization, and mode of thought. Booth demonstrates the real power of this form of pluralism—its power
to orient the relationship of one critical enterprise to another—in part 3, where he discusses his choice to write a rhetoric of fiction, and how that had dictated major differences in method and vocabulary, not only from those of his mentor Crane, but from other strong modes of criticism: "If [the author] is thought of as making readers, then . . . every stroke is in this sense rhetorical, just as in the objective view every stroke is part of the concrete form, or in the expressive view every stroke expresses the artist's psyche, and in the art-is-truth view every stroke reflects a world of values or universals which the book is 'about'" (111-12).

Booth's four terms for critical principles come directly from M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp*; they constitute a critical commonplace that the readers of *Novel* were likely to know. One sees McKeon behind both Abrams and Crane, as the most powerful creator of a meroscopic ("splitting") pluralism in our time. And one sees his direct influence on Booth, certainly in his later work, but even here in his sense that the principle with which he is operating is in potential conflict with another ultimate end he might explore (a "poetics" of fiction), so that Booth speaks of the rhetorical critic as a "stranger in a strange land" when he moves from the question of what authors do to readers to the question of what the literary works they create are by nature.

Booth expresses no dissatisfaction, within "*The Rhetoric of Fiction* and the Poetics of Fictions," with the pluralism of discrete modes. Indeed, he seems eminently contented with the privileged access to disparate systems of thought, together with the self-critical capacity, that systems such as McKeon's grant their users. Nevertheless, Booth may have a problem with the fact that, as a metaphor, McKeon's system suggests a four-dimensional matrix of 256 pigeonholes, into which any philosophical enterprise may be slotted. Such a metaphor emphasizes both the barriers between systems and the irreconcilability of each system with every other. In the last paragraph of "*The Rhetoric of Fiction* and the Poetics of Fictions," Booth sees the short-term remedy for misunderstanding as silence—hardly an attractive solution for this lover of discourse—and, in his own metaphor, envisions literary critics as on "a series of climbing expeditions, attempting different peaks or different faces of the same peak" (117). Such a vision of isolated climbers seems clearly preferable to the war of each against all that Booth compares it with ("demolishing each man's shelter to provide materials for our own"), but it does not approach any notion of a scholarly community. For people personally reconciled to the ultimate strangeness of any individual to any other, there may be nothing unpleasant about this, but
Booth is not one of those people, and one suspects that may be why instrumental pluralism was not finally, for him, a sustaining vision.

**THREE FUNCTIONS OF REVIEWING**

**AT THE PRESENT TIME**

Booth's second essay is a far more intricate (one might almost say "shiftier") piece of rhetoric, not because the values Booth is trying to inculcate are themselves more complex, but because some of the contradictions between the ideology inherent in Crane/McKeon pluralism and Bakhtinian dialogism are beginning to surface in his prose.

Booth opens with a self-deprecating introduction far more extensive than usual, twitting himself for his own bad reading habits: he confesses to misremembering reviews of his work, emphasizing the "careless or inane or hostile strokes," nastier than they were, more given to simple factual inaccuracies. "What I now see are at least three criteria for good reviews, only the first one having much to do with either the reviewers' or the author's ego" ("Three Functions" 3).

Of Booth's three functions of reviewing, only the first, to give the ready-made reader an accurate report and a clear appraisal, establishes a criterion of critical understanding comparable to that posed in "The Rhetoric of Fiction and the Poetics of Fictions." The other two, to entice the indifferent and hostile reader into the enterprise, and to advance the inquiry by vexing the author and others into thought, can occur outside the realm of understanding itself.

Booth's examples of the second function are of celebrated theorists who use the occasion of a review to advance their own views. There is a certain degree of covert irony here, particularly in the implication that by virtue of his fame a Kenneth Burke or a William Empson acquires a license to misread denied to lesser mortals. On the one hand, "the author discovers that his own sense of injustice may be less important, in the long run and for most journal readers, than the effort to keep a given kind of critical culture alive by making recruits" (6, emphasis added). On the other hand, Booth claims that this job will be most effectively done "by the reviewer who has best understood the book in hand. . . . In the long run, making recruits to an enterprise is important only if the enterprise is maintained at the highest possible level, and it seems likely that carefree distortions, however stimulating, will in the long run vitiate the enterprise" (6, emphasis added). On both sides of
the fence, Booth appeals to the “long run.” Perhaps, as with My Fair Lady and A Chorus Line, there are long runs and longer runs. Critical understanding is in the long run subordinate to vitality, but vitality is in the longer run subordinate to critical understanding.

While in the abstract it seems absurd to argue that A is more important than B, which is more important than A, we frequently find that in the political arena contradictions such as these are more plausible. It happens frequently that a society fighting a war to preserve its freedom may have to suspend, for the duration, some of the very freedoms it fights to preserve. Survival is a precondition of any other good, and we recognize that one is occasionally forced to compromise the good to survive. When the same issue comes up in the case of individual survival, though, as in Plato’s Crito, the moral issues are less clear. And surely we are likely to disapprove, however well we may understand, a legislator who feels forced to vote in minor matters against his or her best judgment in order to be reelected and fight for more important ideals. What may not be entirely clear are the ultimate consequences of relocating an argument about academic discourse in the political arena, where the collective good always outweighs the individual interest.

Booth’s third criterion—advancement of the inquiry—is in some ways the most complex of the lot. One reason is that, unless there is already considerable meeting of minds between reviewer and writer, the former cannot advance the latter’s inquiry. Of course, one could always take the position that by saying Book X is no damn good, a reviewer is “advancing the inquiry” by forestalling the reader from taking seriously a meretricious argument. But this would be a trivial case; Booth generally presumes criterion (1) as part of criterion (3), which implies that reviews that meet the third criterion will be rare indeed.

Though Booth never discusses how the process of “vexing into thought” works, there may be an analogue to the notion of the carnivalization of language in Bakhtin: “The trick is to vex [the writer] into further thought by allowing the book to goad the reviewer into a genuine encounter with its problems” (“Three Functions” 7). Book goads reviewer; reviewer encounters writer; reviewer vexes writer into thought. We all get dirtied by each other’s rhetoric.

How this dialogical approach actually works in practice is not quite so simple, as we shall see. The example Booth chooses to take up is not a casual journalistic assessment but a full-scale Diacritics review article devoted to an analysis of his methodology in A Rhetoric of Irony: Susan Suleiman’s “Interpreting Ironies,” published in 1976. The dia-

The argument between Suleiman and Booth shifts ground several times over these five texts, but the central area of disagreement is over whether understanding the meaning of a text necessarily includes an emotional participation in its values or only an understanding of its language and the contexts implicit in that language. But it is not entirely clear how Suleiman "advances" Booth's "inquiry," by "vexing the author . . . into thought"; indeed, Booth and Suleiman agree so much more than they disagree that their dialogue might be viewed as a well-choreographed waltz, with Booth deftly leading, rather than the dispute threatened in such verbs as "vex" and "goad."

**THE CENTRAL DISAGREEMENT: READING DEGREE ZERO**

Suleiman argues that Booth's *Rhetoric of Irony* collapses the valuable distinction between language that we can interpret as irony from an analysis of the meanings of words alone and ironies that require of the reader prior knowledge of the values and intentions of the author. Booth admits to collapsing the distinction, since he does not see how any irony, or indeed any utterance, with the exception of "those texts in which there was no intending author," can be interpreted without reference to authorial intent. He admits that it is possible for a reader to interpret without regard to this intent, but that, when one chooses to do so, "'meanings' become infinite" and hence indeterminate ("Three Functions" 9). In insisting upon intention as determining meaning, Booth is opposing the "uncanny" critics—deconstructionists such as J. Hillis Miller—and rhetorically painting Suleiman into that corner.

In her letter of response, Suleiman is prepared to acquit Booth of collapsing the distinction; she concedes, in fact, that the difference between Booth's intentionalism and that of some structuralists and semioticians is that Booth speaks in terms of an author's intention, while the others might speak instead of an intentionality inherent in the text. The difference in vocabulary is suggestive, but, for Suleiman as for Booth, it pales beside the more important differences between those "canny" critics who feel that authors or texts can determine meaning through
intention and those “uncanny” critics (like Miller) for whom meaning is radically indeterminate. Nevertheless, Suleiman continues to insist that there is a difference between understanding what emotional response a text requires of its implied reader and actually granting that response—citing her own analysis of Drieu La Rochelle’s anti-Semitic novel, *Gilles* (Booth and Suleiman 45).

In his reply, Booth refuses to allow Suleiman to acquit him of collapsing a distinction that he indeed intends to explode—the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic grounds of interpretation. Booth therefore insists upon “the difficulties that underlie your claim that one can somehow get a text as a kind of fact without becoming embroiled in its implied author’s values” (49). Suleiman appears to be claiming that she performed less than a fully sympathetic reading of *Gilles*. Booth disagrees: The repugnance Suleiman registers to the values of *Gilles* suggests that she has performed at least the simulacrum of a sympathetic reading; she must have “in some sense ‘gone along’ with the intended experience (at least far enough to know how it would feel to go all the way)” (49). For Booth, Suleiman has fully understood *Gilles*, but she has also overstood it.

By the end of this dialogue, the reader may not be clear whose inquiry has been advanced. Though Booth praised Suleiman’s review as one that vexed him into further thought about his problem, it is not clear that he has modified his ideas or conceded any ground, and Suleiman has been driven to qualify or cancel most of the theoretical objections she had raised against his enterprise and its methods. For his part, Booth gives up a skirmish or two—for example, he admits Suleiman’s contention that his analysis of irony had skimped on the difficult cases of unlimited global ironies, a point that had been made much less politely by other reviewers—but it is not clear that he has been made to change materially his notion of literary meaning. In effect, her critique has not so much altered or shaken his beliefs as forced him to understand more clearly what his true belief was: namely, that pure linguistic processing, what might be called “reading degree zero,” is a chimera, because an ethical assessment of the values inherent in a text is already included within any interpretation of the text’s meaning. If this dialogue has genuinely clarified something for Booth that was not clear already, it was the two directions in which his line of thinking was leading him: toward his qualified defense, in *Critical Understanding*, of “overstanding” as a generally valid approach to literature, and toward the pluralistic “ethics of fiction” in *The Company We Keep*. 
Perhaps the most interesting thing about Booth's approach to Suleiman is that he does not repeat, mutatis mutandis, what he had done to John Killham: that is, he does not explain Suleiman's misunderstanding of insights generated by his method in terms of the blindness inherited from her own. And Booth could have done this very easily: As one can see from her essay on Gilles, published in Neophilologus, Suleiman is working essentially from a structuralist or semiotic perspective that views meaning as the product of the decipherment of codes; such a logistic method requires some version of the process I have termed "reading degree zero" (pure linguistic processing) as a state from which more sophisticated forms of figural interpretation depart (see, for example, the works by Barthes or Eco, or Suleiman's favorite sources, Genette and Todorov, listed in the bibliography). For Suleiman, understanding language, meanings, and values represent three distinct steps in a hierarchy of semiosis. For Booth, doing a "rhetoric" rather than a semiotics of irony, the reader's grasp of authorial values is already a given, not something to be explained. Their disparate critical languages explain a great deal about the (admittedly minor) ways in which they miss each other's points.

There may have been any number of reasons why Booth did not choose to repeat the lesson in pluralism he had given in the pages of Novel ten years before: a preference for novelty over repetition, or courtesy to Suleiman, whose article was generally favorable, who had worked harder than most reviewers had done to understand him, and who was as sophisticated, methodologically, as he was. But as I have already hinted, the most likely explanation, given the terms of his approach and the evidence of Critical Understanding (published the following year), is that he had become disenchanted with instrumental pluralism as a metatheoretical principle. Where he had once enjoyed demonstrating its powers, Booth is here at least as much concerned to demonstrate the limitations of any pluralism of discrete modes.

The opening chapters of Critical Understanding present the limitations of instrumental pluralism in epistemological terms: though any pluralism seems to be better than any nonpluralistic alternative (monism, skepticism, eclecticism, and so forth), Crane's "pluralism of discrete modes" is only one of many methods for organizing the variety of voices into a harmonious (or dissonant) chorus. After examining the rival pluralisms of Kenneth Burke and M. H. Abrams, Booth feels driven to
From Pluralism to Heteroglossia

seek a metapluralism (a pluralism of pluralisms), but this quest, even before it begins, is doomed to fail: "Can we imagine a genuine pluralist of pluralisms, one who can accept and use many different . . . metalanguages? . . . How could he avoid an infinite regress of ever more vacuous pluralisms?" (Critical Understanding 34). Ultimately, Booth’s vision of a pluralism of pluralisms fails, doomed by the “umbrella paradox” from above and from beneath by the humanity of his exemplars (Crane, Burke, Abrams), whose mutual understanding, despite their efforts, was decidedly imperfect. Disappointed of his ultimate “pluralism of pluralisms,” Booth settles for a “pragmatic” scheme that will maximize the “inseparable values” of “vitality,” “justice,” and “understanding.”

As James Phelan has shown, this gets Booth out of one difficulty only to get him into another: specifically, Booth becomes incoherent on the degree to which data about literary texts constrain interpretive hypotheses. When he wants to emphasize the respect for and understanding of the exemplary text, “Booth sometimes speaks as if data are fairly fixed and decisive, permitting us to distinguish proper from improper questions and to identify different degrees of violation.” At other times, when he seeks a harmonious chorus of pluralistic interpreters, “Booth . . . speaks as if data, though numerous, are not at all decisive” (38–39). Phelan attributes this incoherence primarily to the contradictions inherent in Booth’s simultaneous commitments to understanding and metapluralism. This is surely right as far as it goes, but these commitments too derive from prior choices. As Booth says at the end of Critical Understanding, “I am not one of those who loves knowledge for its own sake . . . [M]y goal is practical: how to improve the practice of controversy by increasing the chances of understanding. I have, in fact, made understanding into a supreme goal, running the risk of implying that it is better for two human minds to share erroneous views than for one to have the truth and the other to misunderstand him” (341–42). Without taking Booth as literally committed to communal error as preferable to isolated truth, the social aspect of learning is decidedly important to him. (Booth’s mentor Crane, as I have suggested elsewhere [see bibliography], seems to have idealized the positivistic goals and methods of science in ways that have contented few of his students. It would seem that to Crane, the isolated and disinterested pursuit of truth would be satisfying in ways it was not to Booth.)

In the shifting figures of speech Booth has used to describe the critical reading and argumentation, over the twenty years that separate “The Rhetoric of Fiction and the Poetics of Fictions” from The Company We
Keep, we can observe something about the way in which this social commitment, surely always present to his character, has surfaced in his thought. Where in the Novel essay Booth had valorized the image of solitary climbers, by 1979 he views Susan Suleiman and himself as two “who can somehow move together in critical thought . . . because certain settled grounds are shared. As the old rhetoricians might have put it, but never did, certain topoi, thank God, remain in place, at least long enough for us to talk together” (“Re-Viewing Reviews” 47). Other thinkers, by contrast, “are so unsettled that they simply drift further apart” (47).

While their moving together has been characterized above as a waltz, Booth gently leading, the figure Booth may have had in mind is that of explorers, temporarily sharing tent space on a “settled ground,” or possibly the inhabitants of icebergs, which generally drift at random but occasionally settle in one position long enough to allow a community to develop. What he and Suleiman can share is a topos, literally a common place, even if their methods and principles do not precisely coincide. It is a metaphor Booth uses even more self-consciously in the conclusion of Critical Understanding, where he treats “critical modes not as positions to be defended but as locations . . . to be explored . . . [The topos] is not . . . a pedestal from which one looks out upon a world of error. Rather it is an inhabited place in which a valued activity can occur among all those who know how to find their way in” (339). From here it is not a long way to the center of The Company We Keep, where Booth slightly revises Bakhtin’s notion that “each of us is constituted in a kind of counterpoint of inherited ‘languages,’ a multiplicity of voices only the ensemble of which can . . . be called ‘my own’” (239) into the vision of the self as a “character” within which the various embodied possibilities and roles—social, familial, literary—are all inscribed:

someone doing my best to enact the various roles “assigned” me. . . .

[T]here are no clear boundaries between the others who are somehow both outside and inside me and the “me” that the others are in. . . . I am a kind of focal point in a field of forces. . . . or, as we used to say, a creature made in the image of God and hence essentially affiliated, joined to others and more like them than different from them. (239–40)

If we become our metaphors—as Booth insists at length in The Company We Keep—it would appear that Booth’s own key metaphors for the processes of literary interpretation and argumentation have been
undergoing a sea change since the late 1960s, shifting thematically from isolation to affiliation, from the individual climbers each ascending a private mountain to the pioneers who chance to meet and exchange views at a convenient topos. The change seems a natural outgrowth of his life and his character, as an individual who sees doing good in the world as one of the principal functions of the intellectual. But if much is gained by this—particularly clarity about Booth's ethical views, so much belabored since the notorious thirteenth chapter of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*—there is also something lost, perhaps, in the waning of the motive behind the earlier metaphor that had also formed a part of Wayne Clayson Booth: those solitary climbers, each making his or her own heroic assault upon a separate mountain peak, symbolic of the pursuit of truth wherever it leads, not for social or personal motives, but for its own sake.

Notes

1. Killham's reply to Booth in the following issue of *Novel* shows that he has learned nothing from the encounter: he keeps attempting to skewer Booth on dilemmas that are pointed within his own frame of reference but not in Booth's (is the narrator of *Tom Jones* a "surrogate for the real Fielding" or "a sort of character in the story"?; is fiction a "category" or an "autonomous form"?) ("Quarrel" 270). A further reply to Killham by Booth, promised for a subsequent issue, never appeared. Either Booth or the editors of *Novel* must have realized that those readers who, like Killham, had not already grasped Booth's methodological point, never would.

2. As Kenneth Burke must be considered the most powerful creator of a holoscopic ("lumping") pluralism.

3. In *The Architectonics of Meaning*, one of McKeon's students, Walter Watson, has further elaborated this system into an eight-dimensional matrix of 65,536 (4⁸) slots. But this massive increase in the number of subdivisions does not change the metaphor in the slightest.

4. Booth's incoherence here over whether understanding or a wide-ranging and vital pluralism is more important is also discussed by Phelan in "Data, Danda, and Disagreement," and in his chapter in this volume.

5. One example of irony derived from word meaning alone might be the opening of Anatole France's *Penguin Island*: "The penguins had the mightiest army in the world. So had the porpoises."

6. As with "*The Rhetoric of Fiction* and the Poetics of Fictions," Booth's careful reading of Suleiman has guaranteed a debating victory over her.
7. Phelan goes on to imply that Booth's pluralism of pluralisms is a chimera, since the real remedy for the problems inherent in holding to a single form of pluralism is to be a better pluralist in one's own chosen mode.

Bibliography


III

Rhetoric and Politics