Learning to Read Martin Luther King's "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence":
Wayne Booth, Character, and the Ethical Criticism of Public Address

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To imagine a language is also to imagine a way of life.

WITTGENSTEIN

Most of us know something of Wayne Booth's contributions in bringing ethical concerns to the study of literary narrative, of his persistent efforts and signal accomplishments at a moment in critical history when such activity had run counter to the intellectual fashion. Surely Booth is right in thinking narrative an important subject, one "of universal concern," for "in the beginning, and from then on, there was story, and it was largely in story that human beings were created and now continue to recreate themselves" ("Ethical Criticism" 289, 290). But it is not only, and not always most importantly, in literary narrative that human beings constitute and progressively reconstitute their characters and communities; the study of narrative has recently been extending itself into the study of the narratives that structure our practical discourse, including those of public address. Booth remains a largely untapped resource for this line of inquiry; but he is a resource worth tapping, for his recent work can contribute to this study both theoretical insights and methodological approaches, both ideas and methods.
In this chapter, I first explore three of Wayne Booth's theoretical insights that challenge contemporary critical and ethical dogmas, and which for our purposes happen to stand in particularly productive interrelation. Then I suggest how they generate ways of examining the narrative dimensions of our practical discourse for their ethical nature. Finally, following Booth's consistent good example, I apply these lessons to a particular text that has a special importance and interest, to which such a mode of criticism has productive access. I hope to show how Booth enables us to describe and evaluate texts in terms of the capacities of character they realize.

THREE BOOTHIAN CONCEPTS

In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Booth unpacked his notion of what it means to be human and to communicate to others who share our substance, describing the human self as "a field of selves," whose "primary mental act . . . is to assent to truth rather than to detect error, 'to take in' and even 'to be taken in'" (126, xvi). This view of human nature and agency mandated a new emphasis in rhetorical inquiry, a focus on character in the context of practical discursive communities: "what is thus demanded by the principle of systematic assent is more rigorous thought than is customary about who 'we' are, the axiological experts whose shared experience confirms what we know together" (108).

This rhetorical redefinition of the self, departing from modernist dogmas of both scientism and irrationalism, led to a consequent shift in the object of ethical criticism. "Most modern critics who have attempted any kind of ethical criticism," Booth acknowledges, "have sought ways of judging the effects of literary works on the lives of their readers—what modern jargon would call after-effects" ("George Eliot" 4); granting such empirical studies their place but noting their extraordinary difficulties, Booth offers an alternative:

"to shift our attention from consequences to qualities of experience sought or achieved by authors and readers during the time of reading or listening. Instead of asking whether this book or poem or play will make me a better person after I put it down, we might ask whether we can describe with any precision what sort of relation I have with it before I put it down." ("George Eliot" 5–6)
Booth's concern is with the quality of life lived in the company we keep with a work's implied author, an ethically relevant concern because, "insofar as the fiction has worked for us, we have lived with its values for the duration: we have been that kind of person for at least as long as we remained in the presence of the work." One of the novelties of Booth's approach is that by this nonconsequentialist focus, he resists the modernist separation of description from evaluation practiced both by the scientismist (who emphasizes description and dismisses evaluation, at least as a form of knowledge) and by the irrationalist (who privileges the latter and disdains the former, at least as morally relevant). Such divisions and dismissals make little sense for a mode of analysis that is "practiced by characters who have been to some degree formed by the sort of thing they are judging, using a range of mental powers that will have been already affected by the narrative being judged" ("Ethical Criticism" 291); that is, for an ethical study that is in some part inescapably reflexive. But such a study must just as inescapably take into account the implied audience, its values, and their evolution over the reading of the piece. Booth is not utterly dismissing effects. He is, rather, reshaping our concepts of what counts as an effect in the ongoing rhetorical reconstitution of our own characters, and redirecting our notions about which of these effects are relevant for our study so as to include "not only the effects on listeners . . . but also the effects on tellers themselves." Because narrative ethics are inescapably reciprocal, as "any story told with genuine engagement will affect its teller fully as much as it affects listeners," we must expand our range of critical vision to consider both parties in every narrative exchange—both implied audience and implied author. "When we do that we discover a surprising range of responsibilities that might be explored" ("Ethical Criticism" 292).

Those responsibilities emerge in the ethos of rhetoric constituted and enacted between implied author and implied audience. I use ethos here not in the technical Aristotelian sense familiar to rhetorical critics, to refer to the character of the speaker as projected in the speech; rather, I refer to the underlying and distinctive character of a practical community, its constitutive and ongoing way of life—more precisely in this case, its distinctive and characterizing way of life in language. These Boothian concepts—the self as a field of selves, the nonconsequentialist focus, and the vision of narrative ethics as a reflexive, reciprocal activity—can generate at least an approach, if not a full-blown critical methodology, for how such a range might be explored.
So what does an ethical criticism based on Boothian insights into narrative do, exactly? First, we know we are to explore how character is shaped in the field of selves shared by author and audience; it might be slightly more precise here to say "implied author" and "implied audience," but remember that it is Booth's premise that insofar as the rhetoric works for us, we live with and enact those values, and thus we become that kind of person for at least as long as we are engaged with the text. In such an ethical criticism, further, we are to focus not primarily on the measuring of effects, but on describing with intersubjectively testable precision the way of life constituted and enacted, the quality of life lived while we are the kind of people, communicators, and moral agents whom the text invites and teaches us to be—the kind of people who take its starting point as our own, who move as we must move and who stop our interpretive deconstructions and reconstructions where we must stop if the text is to have its full intended effect.

And finally, in such an ethical criticism we must take into account narrative's reciprocal and reflexive nature; we must take into account how the stories, as embedded in and constitutive of a way of life, affect both their teller and their listeners. Tellers and listeners are human characters, to some degree inescapably shaped by the sort of thing which they are both judging and participating in; indeed, reshaped continuously by their processes of participation and judgment, depending on a range of intellectual and moral powers inescapably touched and triggered by experiencing the narrative that also is their object.

Ethical criticism based on these principles—and this is one of the features that makes it distinctive in both contemporary ethical and rhetorical thought—unites the descriptive with the evaluative. If we follow Booth, we would begin by doing the best—by which he means the most intersubjectively verifiable—job possible in describing the text as an action. That is to say, in saying how the text acts, we must locate the means the text uses to constitute and enact its rhetorical relation with the intended audience. Then we must go on to describe the possibilities and limits of such a relation—but not, of course, exclusively in terms the critic imposes from outside the text, rather as ethical terms held in common with the audience of the criticism and affected by the experience of the text. We must describe the world of perception, choice, and action encountered in the text, seeing and evaluating as the text permits and enables us to do. For it must be our aim as ethical critics of this kind
to articulate the moral possibilities and limits of this particular ethos of rhetoric; to describe (and inevitably, by our very choice of descriptive terms, to begin to evaluate) what it is like to live, move, and grow in this way of life in language, in the practice of seeing and saying things this way.

There is another way of putting this: Booth’s contribution to the ethical criticism of American public discourse is to prompt us to clarify and criticize the _ken_ of the discourse—the moral vision in terms of which the world may be seen and characterized for purposes of decision and action. As ethical critics, we must analyze the text’s characteristic terms of description and evaluation, and explain how they work with one another to create the text’s constitutive lines of argument, and to rank-order the possibilities for appeal and intersection of motive. This requires us to examine the language in which specific rhetorical situations are to be recognized; the values, assumptions, kinds of attention, and notions of authority with which that language is freighted; the thinkable alternatives for attitude and action therein to be characterized and made determinate for conscious and freely willed choice. It is our task to note how these terms clarify some possibilities (and obscure others) for sustaining or denying, extending or transforming the immediate community of discourse and the wider world of experience in which that discourse is given to operate. By pursuing such concerns, the ethical critic aims to determine what one can and cannot say, can and cannot do, or even aspire to do, through discourse constituted and enacted in the text’s characterizing way—to determine who we have to become, in our interactive relations with the author and with the text in its habits of language and dispositions of persuasion, in order to belong and to move appropriately and effectively in the world the text establishes. In short, Booth gives us an ethical criticism uniquely concerned with character as it is realized in author and audience “dancing together the dance” of the text.

What is distinctive about this sort of ethical criticism is that in its own practice it remains persistently rhetorical—uniting value and fact, uniting critical evaluation to sharable, testable, improvable description of the text and of its ethos of rhetoric. For that ethos has a kind of recoverable public existence, an existence that may be the object not only of personal response, but also (and in a prior way) of sharable description and reasoned critical debate—intersubjective testing that itself becomes a matter of character, an influence on how we may hear and tell stories, and how we may draw from them practical public conclusions.
The proof of any criticism, especially rhetorical criticism of public address, lies in what it can reveal about texts. In the hard case of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," ethical criticism becomes less a mode of passing judgment—the kind of verdict that usually reveals more about the critic than the object criticized—than a mode of noticing and explicating issues of character in understanding and evaluating the text.¹

**MAKING KING'S PILGRIMAGE**

Ethical criticism based on the principles that Booth has made available would seem a particularly appropriate and promising approach to studying the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, since the movement drew so much of its remarkable (one might even call it transformative and reconstitutive) persuasive force from moral appeals—not only in how it "talked its talk," but in how it "walked its walk" true to its principles. This also seems true of Dr. King in a variety of ways; for example, King's willingness to accept arrest was itself symbolic and persuasive, an expression of respect for democracy in general and American public opinion in particular, a kind of living appeal to conscience while being an unflinching enactment of its call to nonviolence. Surely Dr. King had vivid stories to tell, of confrontations, jailings, beatings, narrow escapes, radiant triumphs. But were one to select a King discourse particularly likely to demonstrate the insights of ethical criticism, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" would not be an obvious choice. However, employing ethical criticism enables us to see how "Pilgrimage" tells a character-shaping story, a story after which neither King nor the movement—nor, perhaps, the reader and critic of the movement—can ever be quite the same.

While "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" does tell a story of sorts, it does not directly concern King's colorful public life; rather, by the way it asks its audiences to read in order to understand and appreciate it, it breaks down whatever distinctions between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* its intended audiences might bring to the reading. This essay is an account of his intellectual journey toward an idea that at least one critic has described as the most important contribution to American intellectual history since Dewey, at a minimum: the idea of nonviolent action.⁵ Originally appearing in 1958 as a chapter in his *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, it might have seemed a curiosity:
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an uncharacteristically scholarly and unblushingly abstruse disquisition about the relative merits of such esoteric thinkers as Niebuhr, Jaspers, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Rauschenbusch, appearing anomalously in the middle of a rousing story of one of the most interesting episodes in King's life. Revised for publication in 1960 in the journal of theology and social ethics Christian Century, it might have seemed a little like preaching quite literally to the choir. Both kinds of audiences needed to learn how to read such a peculiar narrative; an ethical criticism of "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" reveals how King taught such readers by moving them through a narrative that in several ways embodied and enacted its own message.

The story begins with King himself at a formative learning stage, in theological seminary. There he is torn, not only intellectually but morally, between the "rather strict fundamentalist tradition" ("Pilgrimage" 35) in which he was raised, and the liberal theology in which he was being trained. Each tradition was "inadequate both for the church and for personal life"; each proved inadequate in the crucible of moral experience—much as, perhaps, King's readers may have found themselves torn between hopeful philosophy and unbending reality. Fundamentalism "fell into a mood of antirationalism . . . stressing a narrow, uncritical biblicism"; it was "too pessimistic" in defining man "only in terms of his existential nature, his capacity for evil." Liberalism was "all too sentimental concerning human nature and . . . leaned toward a false idealism" in coming to terms with "the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence"; in displaying a "superficial optimism concerning human nature," liberalism "failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify . . . distortions and rationalizations." In short, "an adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy, but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both" (36). And it is just here in the text that King enacts the importance of this intellectual quest, this characteristic quest for synthesis.

Fundamentalism seemed to King to accept the unacceptable, to tolerate the intolerable ravages of bigotry in this life, overemphasizing the "better world" beyond. "Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial." But liberalism's optimism about the prospects of change underestimated not only the tactical problems of politics, but the deeper prob-
lem of intractable evil in human hearts, which drove King to suspect that “the ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy and the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy,” the very Gospel itself, had only a limited practical application, that “when racial groups and nations are in conflict a more realistic approach is necessary” (38).

King’s audiences came at this narrative from different directions, each with their own blind spots; King was asking of each a new ken, a new kind of reading activity, calling on new sorts of personal resources from each. The scholars were used to dealing with and assessing ideas as such; indeed, it must have seemed to them circuitous to confront ideas in an explicit narrative rather than in what would have seemed to them the more straightforward form of a treatise. King asked them now to examine those ideas as they would be embodied in human events, and to care about their outcomes. The members of the popular audience on the other hand were no doubt ready to read about events in the story of civil rights; King asked them now to inquire about how those events could be perceived and interpreted with greater moral insight if put in the context of deeper philosophical questions. In other words, to catch the full meaning and force of King’s story of synthesis, these different audiences had to perform a synthesis themselves: each had to animate their concerns with the concerns of the other, each had to exercise new personal resources of empathy in order to read on.

At that point King explains how he himself had performed his synthesis, how he had been taught to perform it by his intellectual and practical engagement with Gandhi’s philosophy of satyagraha (quite literally a synthesis: “truth-force or love-force”). King came to terms with it first intellectually; however committed the members of the civil rights movement might be to their activity, to appreciate its origins and its hold on their leader they had to learn to see their cause as informed with a truthful philosophy that needed to be struggled with and thought about. But at first King “had a merely intellectual understanding” (38). However scholarly the theologians might be about their philosophy, to appreciate the force of that “merely” they had to become interested in King’s forceful enactment of his ideas, at Montgomery and beyond.

King goes on to discuss practical applications of Gandhi’s philosophy about which Gandhi had not directly spoken: the implications of nonviolence on international relations in a nuclear age, and the reality of a personal God. The story of King’s learning to read Gandhi only reaches a conclusion that is to be regarded as satisfying when it becomes
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a story of how he extended those ideas to new intellectual problems and new fields of human endeavor and experience. Our story of learning to read the pilgrimage to nonviolence—King's journey, and our own—cannot find a satisfactory ending in merely changing others' hearts: "it first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had"; and ultimately, it reaches out to the other so that synthesis may occur, and "reconciliation becomes a reality" (39).

"Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" is a pivotal text for the character of the civil rights movement and of King's work in particular, and ethical criticism can help us see how. Afterward, the movement could never be the same, for it was now made accountable, not only for its pragmatic effectiveness but its intellectual content and moral character. But at a time when "discerning the subject" has become more complicated—and the very notion of agency, that seems essential to the history of rhetoric and potentially important in some form to retrieve, is a region of theoretical controversy—Booth's ethical criticism brings even more within our ken: it opens a path for critical inquiry and discourse that can recover some sense of subjectivity, can as it were relocate it in the ethical field of texts and readers, from which self is continuously constituted and reconstituted.

By examining the author's self as a field of selves, we find that King, by becoming the storyteller of the pilgrimage, could never be the same either, henceforward being bound to practice a kind of leadership that synthesized expediential concerns with philosophical ones. By approaching the ethos of rhetoric practiced in this text nonconsequentially, we can appreciate the kind of engagement it offers and the qualities that mark and characterize it.

But in practicing narrative ethics as a reflexive, reciprocal activity, the readers of "Pilgrimage"—at least the readers who have moved with the text, and done all they had to do to understand and appreciate its suasive effects fully in the way they were intended—are also changed. Having performed these syntheses, having called on new resources of strength and courage and empathy, they are readied to extend those powers to new areas of their experience. Learning to read "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" enacts, at least for the time of engagement with the text, a way of life in language that prepares its readers to make similar pilgrimages in their own lives. We can describe and appreciate the
importance of this text because Booth has equipped us with an ethical criticism focused on the capacities of character realized in the author and audience dancing together the dance of the text.

Notes


3. Booth, “Ethical Criticism,” 291-92. In this way he has much in common with James Boyd White’s concern with “textual community,” but I take it to be one of Booth’s distinctive and more richly implicative contributions for the study of narrative ethics to characterize them as reflexive and reciprocal. See James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character and Community* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), especially 14-20. It would be fair to characterize my critical enterprise as an attempt to elaborate what seems to public address scholars still somehow implicit (and what has been in any case still largely unexamined) in the important work of Booth and White, and to make their contributions more clearly relevant and readily usable in the analysis of public address. To the extent that I would claim an original contribution, it would be in adapting the focus of ethical criticism from individual texts to larger bodies of materials of various kinds over time and changing circumstance.

4. The rhetorical critic Edwin Black, in “The Second Persona,” has described an essential difficulty with current forms of ethical criticism: “the moral judgment of a text is a portentious act in the process of criticism, and ... the terminal character of such a judgment works to close critical discussion rather than open or encourage it” (109). I discuss this difficulty and the possibilities that Booth and James Boyd White provide for circumventing it in “Discursive Community and the Problem of Perspective in Ethical Criticism,” in *Conversations on Communication Ethics*, ed. Karen Joy Greenberg (Northwood, IL: Ablex, 1991).

5. The critic in question was myself, at the Speech Communication Association’s January 1988 Conference on the Oratory of Dr. Martin Luther
King, Jr., in a presentation entitled "When 'Silence is Betrayal': An Ethical Criticism of the Revolution of Values in Martin Luther King's Speech at the Riverside Church"; and in "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in the Iowa City Press-Citizen 20 Jan. 1988: 3A.

Bibliography


IV

Booth across Disciplines