

WAYNE C. BOOTH THE RHETORIC OF FICTION (1961)

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Preface to the First Edition (xiii-xv)

Booth stresses that his interest in "writing about the rhetoric of fiction" (xiii) does not extend to an interest in "didactic fiction, fiction used for propaganda or instruction" (xiii). His subject is, rather, the "technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers – the rhetorical resources available to the writer of epic, novel, or short story as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader" (xiii). Referring, for example, to the novel Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert, Booth is interested in finding "any defence that can be offered, on aesthetical grounds, for an art full of rhetorical appeals" (xiii), such as direct authorial intrusions:

What kind of art is it that will allow Flaubert to barge into his action to describe Emma as "unaware that now she was eager to yield to the very thing that had made her so indignant," and as 'totally unconscious that she was prostituting herself'? Whatever their answers, critics have often been troubled by this kind of overt, distinguishable rhetoric. (xiii)

The problem is, Booth contends, that the "same problems are raised, though in less obvious form, by the *disguised rhetoric* of modern fiction" (my emphasis; xiii). The efforts of modern novelists, Booth argues, is often "dictated by the effort to help the reader grasp the work" (xiii).

Booth admits that he is arbitrarily separating "technique" (xiii), the "author's means of controlling his reader" (xiii), from "all of the social and psychological forces that affect authors and readers" (xiii). He has set to one side the "different demands made by different audiences in different times" (xiii-xiv) (treated, for example, by Q. D. Leavis in Fiction and the Reading Public), "questions about the psychological qualities in readers that account for the almost universal interest in fiction" (xiv) (addressed by Simon Lesser in Fiction and the Unconscious), and the "psychology of the author and the whole question of how it relates to the creative process" (xiv). This is because his real concern is with "whether rhetoric is compatible with art" (xiv). He also admits that some might criticise him for reducing the "free and inexplicable processes of the creative imagination to the crafty calculations of commercial entertainers" (xiv), that is, for failing to differentiate between "artists who consciously calculate and artists who simply express themselves with no thought of affecting a reader" (xiv). Booth is of the view that, whether deliberate or not, it is a "question of whether an author's work . . . communicates itself" (xiv): the "success of an author's rhetoric does not depend on whether he thought about his readers as he wrote" (xiv). His goal is to "free both readers and novelists from the constraints of what novelists must do, by reminding them in a systematic way of what good novelists have in fact done" (xv).

Part I: "Artistic Purity and the Rhetoric of Fiction"

Chapter I: "Telling and Showing" (3-22):

Booth begins by pointing out that one of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart. Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story,

artifice is undoubtedly present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know. In life we never know anyone by ourselves by thoroughly reliable internal signs, and most of us achieve an all too partial view even of ourselves. It is in a way strange, then, that in literature from the very beginning we have been told motives directly and authoritatively without being forced to rely on those shaky inferences about other men which we cannot avoid in our own lives. (3)

Through direct authorial intrusions, the author gives us the "kind of information never obtained about real people" (3). But this is "information that we must accept without question if we are to grasp the story that is to follow" (3).

This "form of artificial authority has been present in most narrative until recent times" (4), for example, in the Book of Job in the Bible and Homer's *Odyssey*. Though "[d]irect and authoritative rhetoric of this kind" (6), to be precise, what Booth calls "direct guidance" (6) has "never completely disappeared from fiction" (6), it is "not what we are likely to find if we turn to a typical modern novel or short story" (6). The modern author, Booth argues, has "effaced himself, renounced the privilege of direct intervention, retreated to the wings and left his characters to work out their own fates upon the stage" (7). In such writers, the "story is present without comment, leaving the reader without the guidance of explicit evaluation" (7). Since Flaubert, Booth contends,

many authors and critics have been convinced that 'objective' or 'impersonal' or 'dramatic' modes of narration are naturally superior any mode that allows for direct appearances by the author or his reliable spokesman. Sometimes . . . the complex issues involved in this shift have been reduced to a convenient distinction between 'showing,' which is artistic, and 'telling,' which is inartistic. 'I shall not tell you anything,' says a fine young novelist in defence of his art. 'I shall allow you to eavesdrop on my people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which. . . . I can *show* much, but show only. (8)

Booth insists that "changed attitudes toward the author's voice in fiction raise problems that go far deeper than this simplified version of point of view would suggest" (8). He alludes to Percy Lubbock in this regard who argued that the "art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (qtd. in Booth, 8). Booth, though, questions such simple distinctions between 'showing' and 'telling,' contending that we need to question "what happens when an author engages a reader fully with a work of fiction" (8). Such questions "lead us to a view of fictional technique which necessarily goes far beyond the reductions that we have sometimes accepted under the concept of 'point of view'" (8-9).

To address such issues, Booth turns his attention to two short stories from the Medieval collection called the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, "stories written long before anyone worried very much about cleaning out the rhetorical impurities from the house of fiction" (9). The point of Booth's discussion of these two stories (pp. 9-16) is to suggest that "Boccaccio's style . . . serves as a kind of rhetoric convincing the reader of the reality of his world" (note #7, p. 16). "What is important here is to recognise the radical inadequacy of the telling-showing distinction in dealing with the practice of this one author" (16). His "artistry lies not in adherence to any one supreme manner of narration but rather in his ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing" (16).

In the chapters which follow, Booth examines "some of the more important arguments for authorial objectivity" (16), that is, for "eliminating certain overt signs of the author's presence" (16). Booth is keen to examine, first, the "variety of forms" (16) which

the "author's voice" (16) can take. In other words, "[w]hat is it . . . that we might expunge if we attempted to drive the author from the house of fiction" (16). First, "we must erase all direct addresses to the reader, all commentary in the author's own name" (16). The question is, however, what degree of 'commentary' merits being expunged. Should all, including "less obtrusive" (17) commentaries be expunged? Moreover, even if we "eliminate all such explicit judgments, the author's presence will be obvious on every occasion when he moves into or out of a character's mind – when he 'shifts his point of view,' as we have come to put it" (17). Each such shift from the perspective of one character to another is a troubling reminder of the "author's presence" (17). What is more, "why not go the next step and object to all inside views, not simply those that require a shift in point of view" (17). In real life, Booth argues, all "such views are not to be had" (17) and the "act of providing them is itself an obtrusion by the author" (17). We must object, Booth insists, to the "reliable statements of any dramatised character, not just the author in his own voice, because the act of narration as performed by even the most highly dramatised narrator is itself the author's presentation of a prolonged 'inside view' of a character" (18). Moreover, the author is "present in every speech given by any character who has had conferred upon him, in whatever manner, the badge of reliability" (18). "We can go on and on, purging the work of every recognisably personal touch, every distinctive literary allusion or colorful metaphor, every pattern of myth or symbol; they all implicitly evaluate. Any discerning reader can recognise that they are imposed by the author" (18-19). We may even go so far as to object, like Jean-Paul Sartre does, to "all evidences of the author's meddling with the natural sequence, proportion, or duration of events" (19). All such things are "signs of the author's manipulating presence" (19). Even with all such devices eliminated, the very choice to write one story as opposed to another reveals the decisive role played by the author. Even "with all forms of the author's voice expunged" (20), there remains a "shameful artificiality" (20) for the "author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it" (20). Though the "author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20).

Chapter VI: "Types of Narration" (149-165):

Here, Booth reminds us that the "author cannot choose to avoid rhetoric; he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ" (149). Similarly, he "cannot choose whether or not to affect his reader's evaluations by his choice of narrative manner; he can only choose whether to do it well or badly" (149). The open secret is that "even the purest of dramas is not purely dramatic in the sense of being entirely presented, entirely shown as taking place in the moment" (149). As Dryden points out, "try as the author may to ignore the troublesome fact, 'some parts of the action are more fit to be represented, some to be related'" (149).

The existence of the "many narrative devices in the fiction we know" (149) reveals the "embarrassing inadequacy of our traditional classification of 'point of view' into three or four kinds, variables only of the 'person' and the degrees of omniscience" (149). Terms like 'first-person' and 'omniscient' do little justice to the actual complexity of points of view in prose fiction. Hence, Booth's desire to "attempt a richer tabulation of the forms the author's voice can take" (150).

Person: the difference between narration in the first and narration in the third person is the "most overworked distinction" (150). "To say that a story is told in the first or third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects" (150). We can "hardly expect to find useful criteria in a distinction that throws all fiction into two, or

at most three, heaps" (150). This is confirmed by the "fact that all the following functional distinctions apply to both first- and third- person narration alike" (151).

Dramatised and Undramatised Narrators: the "most important differences in narrative depend on whether the narrator is dramatised in his own right or whether his beliefs and characteristics are shared by the author" (151).

The "*implied author (the author's 'second self')*" (151): even the "novel in which no narrator is dramatised creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God" (151). The implied author is 'always distinct from the 'real man' – whatever we may take him to be – who creates a superior version of himself, a 'second self,' as he creates his work" (151). Where the novel in question "does not refer directly to this author, there will be no distinction between him and the implied, undramatised narrator" (151).

Undramatised Narrators: "most tales are presented as passing through the consciousness of a teller, whether an 'I' or a 'he'" (151). Even in drama, "much of what is given is narrated by someone" (151). In fiction, "as soon as we encounter an 'I,' we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event. Where there is no such 'I,' . . . the inexperienced reader may make the mistake of thinking that the story comes to him unmediated" (151-152). However, "no such mistake can be made" (152) once the author "places a narrator in the tale, even if he is given no personal characteristics whatever" (152).

Dramatised Narrators: some narrators are barely dramatised in that the details of their life and personality are limited, whereas "many novels dramatised their narrators with great fulness, making them into characters who are as vivid as those they tell us about" (152). In such works, the "narrator is often radically different from the implied author who creates him" (152). Many dramatised narrators "are never explicitly labelled as narrators at all" (152) but "every speech, every gesture, narrates; most works contain disguised narrators who are used to tell the audience what it needs to know, while seeming merely to act out their roles" (152). Most such disguised narrators "speak with an authority as sure as God's" (152). The "most important unacknowledged narrators in modern fiction are the third-person 'centres of consciousness' through whom authors have filtered their narratives" (153). Whether "such 'reflectors,' as James sometimes called them, are highly polished mirrors reflecting complex mental experience, or the rather turbid, send-bound 'camera eyes' of much fiction since James, they fill precisely the function of avowed narrators" (153). There is a seeming "very real advantage" (153) to the deployment of such a method and this has become a "dominant theme in modern criticism" (153) as long as emphasis is on "such qualities as naturalness and vividness" (153). However, once we "break out of the fashionable assumption that all good fiction tries for the same kind of vivid illusion" (153), we are able to recognise real "disadvantages" (153) and that the "third-person reflector is only one mode among many, suitable for some effects but cumbersome and even harmful when other effects are desired" (153).

Observers and Narrator-Agents: there are "mere observers" (153) as well as "narrator-agents" (153) who "produce some measurable affect on the course of events (153-154), ranging from a "minor involvement" (154) to a "central role" (154). Moreover, all narrators and observers, whether in the first- or third-person, "can relay their tales to us primarily as scene . . . , primarily as summary or what Lubbock called 'picture' . . . , or, most commonly, as a combination of the two" (154). Like

Aristotle's distinction between dramatic [mimesis] and narrative [diegesis] manners, the somewhat different modern distinction between showing and telling does cover the ground. But the trouble is that it pays for broad coverage with gross imprecision. Narrators of all shapes and shades must

either report dialogue alone or support it with 'stage directions' and description of setting. (154)

However, the "quality of being 'scenic' suggests very little about literary effect" (154). The "contrast between scene and summary, between showing and telling, is likely to be of little use until we specify the kind of narrator who is providing the scene or summary" (154-155).

Commentary: Narrators who "allow themselves to tell as well as show vary greatly depending on the amount and kind of commentary allowed in addition to a direct relating of events in scene and summary" (155). Such commentary can "range over any aspect of human experience" (155) and is related to the business at hand in many ways: it can be "merely ornamental" (155), or serve a "rhetorical purpose" (155) that is not part of the "dramatic structure" (155), or it may be "integral to the dramatic structure" (155).

Self-Conscious Narrators: Both observers and narrator-agents may be either "self-conscious" (155), that is, "aware of themselves as writers" (155), and not, that is, who either "rarely if ever discuss their writing chores" (155) or "seem unaware that they are writing, thinking, speaking, or 'reflecting' a literary work" (155).

Variations of Distance: narrators "differ markedly according to the degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story" (155). In any "reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical" (155). Booth draws a distinction between "aesthetic distance" (156) and the variations in "personal beliefs and qualities" (156) separating author, narrator, characters and reader of which he is speaking here, the former referring to "distance in time and space, differences of social class or conventions of speech or dress" (156) which serve to "control our sense that we are dealing with an aesthetic object" (156). These variations take several forms: the narrator may be "more or less distant" (156) on moral, intellectual, physical or temporal grounds from, first, the "implied author" (156); second, from the "characters in the story he tells" (156), third, from the "reader's own norms" (156) (with the "repudiation of omniscient narration, and in the face of inherent limitations in dramatised reliable narrators" [156], modern authors have "experimented with unreliable narrators whose characteristics change in the course of their works they narrate" [156]; since Shakespeare, "stories of character development or degeneration have become more and more popular" [157], culminating in the "full uses of the third-person reflector" [157] to "show a narrator changing as *he narrates*" [157]); similarly, the "implied author" (157) may be more or less distant, fourth, "from the reader" (157) (from the author's viewpoint, a "successful reading of his book must eliminate all distance between the essential norms of his implied author and the norms of the postulated reader" (157) and, fifth, from "*other characters*" (158). For "practical criticism probably the most important of these kinds of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator" (158). The most important quality of the narrative is not, in Booth's view, that it is recounted in the first- or third-person, but rather the narrator's "moral and intellectual qualities" (158) for if "he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed" (158). For Booth, a narrator is "*reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (158-159). Booth admits that some reliable narrators may be ironic and, thus, "potentially deceptive" (159) and may sometimes be downright liars, but normally it is often a matter of "what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies

him" (159).

Variations in Support or Correction: Both reliable and unreliable narrators can either be "unsupported or uncorrected by other narrators" (159) or "supported or corrected" (159). Sometimes it is difficult to infer "whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible" (160) while, in other works, it is relatively easy. Sometimes support or correction is "provided from within the action" (160) or "provided externally, to help the reader correct or reinforce his won views as against the narrator's" (160).

Privilege: observers and narrators, "whether self-conscious or not, reliable or not, commenting or silent, isolated or supported, can be either privileged to know what could not be learned by strictly natural means" (160) (though few omniscient narrators are "allowed to know or show as much as their authors know" [160]) or "limited to realistic vision and inference" (160). Complete privilege is "what we usually call omniscience" (160). There are, however, "many kinds of privilege" (160): some "limitations are only temporary" (160), while others are "more nearly permanent but subject to momentary relaxation" (160). Yet others are "confined to what their literal condition would allow them to know" (160). The "most important single privilege is that of obtaining an inside view of another character, because of the rhetorical power that such a privilege conveys upon a narrator" (160-161). Many works which are classified as "narrated dramatically, with everything relayed to us through the limited views of the characters, postulate fully as much omniscience in the silent author as Fielding claims for himself" (161). To see nothing but what the minds in question contain, Booth argues, "omniscience with teeth in it" (161) in that the "implied author demands our absolute faith in his powers of divination, We must never for a moment doubt that he knows everything" (161) about each mind portrayed in a seemingly impersonal manner, or that "he has chosen correctly how much to show of each" (161). In short, "impersonal narration is really no escape from omniscience – the true author is as 'unnaturally' all-knowing as he ever was" (161). This is true of so-called "'dramatic' storytelling" (161) where the "author can present his characters in a dramatic situation without in the least presenting them in what we normally think of as a dramatic manner" (161). Ostensibly, the goal of dramatic narration is to "show characters dramatically engaged with each other, motive clashing with motive" (162) by giving the "impression that the story is taking place by itself, with characters existing in a dramatic relationship vis-a-vis the spectator, unmediated by a narrator" (162), but this rarely occurs purely and simply in prose fiction. This is true also of "fiction that attempts to dramatise states of consciousness directly" (162) like Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man where the hero Stephen "is placed on the stage before us, acting out his destiny with only disguised helps or comments from his author" (162-163). It is not "his actions that are dramatised directly, not his speech that we hear unmediated. What is dramatised is his mental record of everything that happens. We see his consciousness at work on the world" (163). But the "report we are given of what goes on in Stephen's mind is a monologue uninvolved in any modifying context. And it is an infallible report" (163). For this reason, we 'accept, by convention, the claim that what is reported as going on in Stephen's mind really goes on there, or in other words, that Joyce knows how Stephen's mind works" (163). It is, Booth argues, the "Omniscient, infallible author" (163) who speaks: the "report is direct, and it is clearly unmodified by any 'dramatic' context" (163) – the result is a situation much like that of the dramatised lyric poem where it is difficult to decide whether it is the author or the main protagonist speaking.

Inside Views: the "depth and the axis" (163) of the "plunge" (163) of the inside view offered by narrators vary, Booth argues. Sometimes the plunge is "shallow" (163), at other times it is "deep" (163). Any "sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily

turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator; inside views are thus subject to variations in all of the qualities . . . described above, and most importantly in the degree of unreliability" (163).

Booth concludes that, though narration is an "art" (164), it is possible to "formulate principles about it" (164) because there are "systematic elements in every art" (164) and critics must strive to "explain technical successes and failures by reference to general principles" (164). Where, though, are these general principles "to be found" (164)? Booth answers that the novelist gets little, if any, help from the critic's prognostications. Rather, as Henry James reveals, the novelist "discovers his narrative technique as he tries to achieve for his readers the potentialities of his developing idea" (165). For this reason, the "majority of his choices" (165) are "choices of degree, not kind" (165): to

decide that your narrator shall not be omniscient decides practically nothing.

The hard question: just how *inconscious* shall he be? Again, to decide on first-person narration settles only a part of one's problem, perhaps the easiest part. What kind of first person? How fully characterised? How much aware of himself as narrator? How reliable? How much confined to realistic inference; how far privileged to go beyond realism? (165)

These questions can be answered with reference more to the "practice of his peers" (165), that is, the "potentialities and necessities of particular works" (165) and "not by reference to fiction in general" (165), than the "abstract rules of the textbooks" (165), "rules about point of view" (165), and such like. The "sensitive author who reads the great novels finds in them a storehouse of precise examples, of how *this* effect, as distinct from all other possible effects, was heightened by the proper narrative choice" (165). "In dealing with the types of narration, the critic must always limp behind, referring constantly to the varied practice which alone can correct his temptations to overgeneralise" (165). In place of "abstract rules" (165), we need "more painstaking, specific accounts of how great tales are told" (165).