Wayne Booth and the Politics of Ethics

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Ethical concerns have always been at the heart of Wayne Booth's critical enterprise. The early The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) as well as the subsequent A Rhetoric of Irony (1974) proposed pioneering critical methodologies for locating authorial point of view—a point of view that was, Booth always insisted, while mediated through structure, style, and voice, necessarily ethical in its implications. Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent (1974) and Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism (1979) offered rigorous commentaries on the logical grounds upon which readers, critics, and authors might achieve a common terrain for critical dispute—and, in so doing, articulate their common or divergent ethical concerns. It is, however, in The Company We Keep (1988), subtitled “An Ethics of Fiction,” that Booth shrugs off the formalistic aspects of his Chicago school heritage and undertakes his fullest encounter with the ethical questions that are involved in the activities of writing, reading, and commenting upon literary texts. In this discussion of the relation of politics to ethics in Booth’s work, I shall therefore focus upon this book, which, in its encounter with questions of interpretation and value that have been urgently raised by recent critical theory, combines an abiding passion for the literary classics with a lively concern for social justice and a strong intellectual commitment to discovering the connections between the two.

There are certain crucial respects in which Booth’s attempt to propose an ethics of reading is made problematic by the very question he is asking: Can the “ethics” embedded in literary texts be meaningfully discussed apart from an analysis of the social and political assumptions
and practices that endow any given ethical system with its aura of legitimacy? However fully it may wish to historicize the values invoked in a text, can any project taking "ethics" as its ground succeed in relating these values to the competing ethical systems generated by actual social groups in conflict? Does the very invocation of the term ethics—even if qualified by the modest singular article "an"—fetishize questions of textual morality, setting them apart from—and prior to—the messy and embattled terrain of political practice? Before I plunge into a consideration of the relation of ethics to politics in Booth's study, however, I must acknowledge the massive dimensions of Booth's achievement in The Company We Keep. For, in this landmark study, Booth builds upon the most valuable insights of Chicago school theory, which was by no means as unremittingly formalistic as is often supposed, to construct a compelling model for describing the ways in which a text's "power of form" implicates readers in its author's values.

Arguing that ethical considerations are intimately bound up with any encounter between an author and a reader, Booth declares that it is incumbent upon critics to engage in "ethical criticism," which he defines as the "attempt[t] to describe the encounters of a story-teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener" (Company 8). As he develops what he means by the theory and practice of "ethical criticism" in The Company We Keep, it becomes clear that Booth has relinquished much of the ahistoricism and abstraction at times accompanying the Chicago school's formulations about the relation of form to ideology and reception. In stipulating that an author's "patterning of desire" articulates historically grounded social beliefs at the same time that it shapes these intentionally into a certain type of artistic whole, for example, Booth supersedes the rigid and artificial distinctions between "extratextual" and "literary" causalities proposed by earlier Chicago school critics such as R. S. Crane and Elder Olson (see Olson, "Outline"; Crane, Principles 52; Crane, "Introduction" 20). Thus in his remarks on e. e. cummings's "ygUDuh," ostensibly a satire upon white American workers' crudely racist attitudes toward the Japanese in the World War II era, Booth points out that the "formal" cause of cummings's clever play with linguistic opacity is inseparable from its "final" cause, namely, the poet's desire to expose the ways in which patriotism can mask—but also enable—a fascist characterization of the "other." Booth also notes, however, that a recognition of cummings's simultaneously aesthetic and social intention should prompt the critic to scrutinize closely the particular ways in which the poet positions his reader:

Looked at more closely... the poem may come to seem tainted by another form of bigotry; in capitalizing on one rejected act of stereotyping on the basis of race, it relies on another, on the basis of class, as it suggests that people who speak substandard English embrace substandard moral notions... The elite position of the poet attacking bigotry, reinforced by the elite assumptions of readers who take pride in performing an intricate act of linguistic deciphering, is vulnerable to the reader's question: "as you mock these slobs for their blindness to the Japanese as 'other,' where do you stand toward them as your 'other'?" (218)

Booth's ethical criticism of the "patterning of desire" in cummings's poem entails not only an examination of the satisfactions afforded by the (educated) reader's decoding of cummings's play with "typical" working-class language but also an inquiry into and judgment upon the elitist social assumptions encoded within the generalizations about the working class that the poem encourages. After a point, Booth demonstrates, historical and aesthetic causalities are indistinguishable from one another.

In The Company We Keep, Booth continually points out how generic convention and dynamics mobilize social values: the text is, for Booth, by nature ethical to the core. In fortifying his ethics of reading, Booth demonstrates the various axes along which a neo-Aristotelian concern with such matters as instabilities and resolutions in plot is not merely compatible with, but actually requires, analysis of the specifically literary ways in which fictional texts work upon readers. In a subtle and highly dialectical commentary upon Jane Austen's Emma, he shows how the text's adherence to romantic plot conventions would appear to entrap the reader into endorsing the notion that marriage is the necessary context of female self-realization: by being urged to desire Emma's consignment to the custodianship of the gallant but sober Knightley, readers are entrapped within sexist social values by their own vicarious "literary" desires. Yet Booth also analyzes the narrator's persistently ironic deflation of the expectations routinely accompanying romantic closure, which, he argues, functions to undercut the notion that Emma's selfhood, hard won through her own experience, can really consist in nuptial bliss. The text's manner of representation interacts with, and alters, its mode of representation. Booth salvages Austen for feminism by demonstrating that the text's meaning cannot be equated with any single narrative element but must be inferred from a description of the specific narrative experience afforded by the text. A Chicago school ex-
amination of the text’s “power” as an instance of narrative comedy thus provides privileged access to its embodiment of ideology.1

But the ethical criticism of narrative form does not always yield ideological recuperation of the classics for contemporary readers. After a close consideration of the alternative interpretive possibilities embodied within Rabelais’s dialogic treatment of the status of women in Gargantua and Pantagruel, Booth concludes that these texts’ refusal to include the voices of their many female characters leaves the reader with the indelible impression that women are simply material for “masculine laughter” (394). Similarly, after undertaking a careful reading of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn that focuses not only on the novel’s vexing ending but also on the shifting attitudes and judgments orchestrated throughout the narrative, Booth feels compelled to conclude that the representation of Jim implies very damaging generalizations about the responses of slaves to their conditions of servitude. Although he continues to insist that Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a “wonderful” book, he also concedes, “I cannot, by sheer act of will, restore Twain’s former glow” (477). The application of ethical poetics to an examination of the dynamis informing various classic works of literature is thus as likely to produce a lowering of the critic’s estimate of a text as it is to yield “proof” of the text’s unshorned and enduring value.

At the heart of Booth’s ethical enterprise, then, is a conception of the rights—and responsibilities—of the reader that substantially alters the notions of textual reception originally postulated by the Chicago school critics, who generally stipulated an undifferentiated “we” receptive to an apolitical “pleasure” and “beauty” (Olson 366). While Booth, as an unreconstructed intentionalist, rejects the subjectivism he sees implied in many versions of reader-response criticism, he also grants that different readers will bring different ethical values to texts and come away with different assessments. A key “character” introduced at the outset of The Company We Keep is one Paul Moses, a black member of the University of Chicago professorial staff, who in the early 1960s refused to teach Huckle Finn because of its “many distorted views of race” (3). Moses’s principled stand—which, Booth freely admits, he failed to grant sufficient legitimacy at the time—haunts Booth throughout his study, functioning as a social conscience continually challenging the formalist abstractions of a “pure” (that is, unethical) criticism. Booth continues to insist, as he did in The Rhetoric of Fiction, that literary texts work upon their readers by “creating” them as “peers” (Rhetoric of Fiction 397). But he now insists with equal force that it is the task of criticism to query “the offer of disinterested friendship” held out by the implied author—who may “prove to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing” (177). The “we” who, for Olson or Crane, served as the author’s perfect mirror is now dissolved into multiple social and historical selves, each claiming the right to engage in reading and criticism along the lines dictated by distinctive ethical imperatives. “Pleasure” is no longer a form of potential energy stored within the text, awaiting transformation into kinesis by an ideal reader, but a material measure of the extent to which the text’s implied values have been made moving and acceptable to an actual reader experiencing an actual evaluative response.

What Booth urges in The Company We Keep, in other words, is a view of the reading process, and of the critical acts elucidating that process, that enlists the best features of the Chicago school’s concern with texts as instances of persuasive praxis. Booth’s rehabilitation of neo-Aristotelian poetic and rhetorical theory for socially committed criticism thus prompts us to consider exactly how poetic and fictional texts do their ideological work. While much valuable semiotic inquiry has recently been undertaken by critics arguing that all texts need to be scrutinized as texts, without exempting the so-called “nonfictional” genres, Booth’s study usefully illuminates the rhetorical strategies peculiar to the “specifically literary” genres. In short, The Company We Keep enriches our understanding of the ethical powers of literature, helping us to see both how literary works perform their rhetorical tasks and why we should take seriously their function as purveyors of social values. It brings us to the threshold of a rhetoric of politics.

If Booth’s study brings us to this threshold, however, it does not take us over the lintel. It fails in this enterprise, in my view, largely because it never directly confronts the relation between the ethical and the political, but instead continually slips from the former to the latter without clarifying their points of tangency or difference. Booth evinces an awareness of this problem at the outset, declaring that

[we might . . . broaden the term “ethical” even further, making it carry the weight of all political criticism as a rough synonym for what many people would call ideological criticism. I must often use it in that broad sense, but although I raise political issues throughout, I cannot pretend to offer the full encounter with them that the enterprise inherently demands. (12)

At subsequent points in The Company We Keep, Booth expressly points to the embeddedness of political considerations within ethical judg-
ments, as, for example, when he refers to the "political questions that naturally spring from any serious thinking about the ethical powers of fictions" (137), or when he notes that the capacity to acknowledge one's beliefs requires "a fully developed art of ethical (and, by implication, political) criticism" (290). Booth's careful wording in these passages suggests that he does not see the political and the ethical as precisely equivalent to one another, though they may be closely related. His abstention from defining this relation, however, leaves the reader with the impression that what "comes first"—and really "matters"—is ethics: politics may in some sense flow from ethics, but ethical decisions and judgments are prior in both temporal sequence and importance.

Booth's reluctance to confront the relation of ethics to politics results in two major omissions in *The Company We Keep*. The first of these consists in his almost exclusive concentration upon acknowledged "classics" and his refusal to engage in sustained critical dialogue with any work that is not squarely situated within the established canon. To make this charge is not to claim that Booth makes no mention of noncanonical texts; *The Company We Keep* is in fact replete with passing references to soap operas, detective stories, popular romances, and sensationalistic potboilers such as *Jaws*. He offers laudatory assessments of several texts—for example, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*—that have in fact become canonical, or near canonical since the publication of this book six years ago. But Booth refrains from discussing the particular sorts of ethical criticism that can be prompted by the works of serious writers who, for reasons having to do with race, gender, class, or simply historical contemporaneity, have not (or not yet) emerged as creators of cultural monuments.

His most fully fleshed out examples are drawn from Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Austen, Lawrence, Rabelais, and Twain—all white, all but one male, and all—with the exception of Rabelais, for whom such a label would be anachronistic—bourgeois.

No doubt Booth could justify his choice of textual examples by arguing that his principal point is that even—indeed, especially—the classics need to be scrutinized for ethical shortcomings: Rabelais, Austen, Lawrence, Twain, and others warrant close investigation precisely because they are commonly held to propound incontrovertible wisdoms and articulating universal values. The fact remains, however, that the reader of *The Company We Keep* is left with the distinct impression that the most significant (if flawed) company one should choose to keep is the "classic" writer, who offers a "richer, fuller life" than any of his or her lesser counterparts. Thus, by a curious turn of the wheel, the classic writers whom Booth chastises for their questionable ethics emerge as, if not "morally" rehabilitated, at least rehabilitated as the principal objects of critical inquiry. As Booth notes,

"Rather than finding reasons to ban narratives, we are now more interested in protecting them—and thus ourselves—from premature, unacknowledged, and irresponsible judgments. The classics need not fear us if we look them in the eye; most of them—we cannot know which ones in advance of fresh reading—can more than hold their own in any fair encounter. Perhaps the supreme value of ethical criticism is that once we have practiced it vigorously in the presence of a classic, that classic becomes more fully alive in our culture than it was before." (423)

Indeed, Booth's repeated use of the word "classic," as well as his continual deployment of honorific adjectives such as "wonderful" and "beautiful" to describe even works he finds ethically lacking, has the effect of protecting his cherished texts in advance from even the most searing criticism. The current debate about canon busting is thus largely defused by Booth's emphasis upon the classics, which, he assures us, contains sufficient meat—delicious meat—for the most voracious political critic.

Booth is of course entitled to his love of the classics. But the absence in *The Company We Keep* of any detailed analysis of texts by working-class writers or writers of color substantially limits the range of his description of the powers and functions of ethical criticism. My point here is not simply that Booth has violated some pluralistic notion of "equal time" for all comers on the literary scene; although, given his evident enthusiasm for other sorts of pluralism, this point could also be made. My complaint is that he has sloughed over one very important type of ethical effect that a text can produce—namely, that of immersing readers in a represented world that calls into question their sense of moral purity or that simply teaches them something new about social reality. If ethical criticism consists simply of describing and judging the ways in which classic texts encode social values that may, upon closer examination, appear morally repugnant, the critic is assumed to inhabit a superior ethical stance: possessed of egalitarian values the author does not hold (or at least not fully enough), the critic confronts her or his own agonized contradiction between aesthetic pleasure and social belief. But if ethical criticism is to address the real political problems that many of
us encounter, not only in our own reading experiences but also in those of our students, it must additionally theorize the dynamics of situations where writers challenge readers to assume more egalitarian attitudes (antiracist, antisexist, anticlassist) than they might already espouse. Ethical criticism must take into account that the writer may be the principal "ethical critic," and the would-be emancipated reader his or her pupil—chastened, bemused, guilt-ridden, indignant, even resentful.

Booth by no means ignores the transformative power that books can have: indeed, at one point in *The Company We Keep* he offers a fascinating catalogue of instances in which numerous friends and acquaintances have attested to the liberating influence certain books have had upon their attitudes and lives (578–79). But, in a study that is generally quite remarkable for its candor and self-critical openness, Booth himself offers no detailed ethical criticism of his own encounter with any of the noncanonical texts he finds compelling, even though doing so might significantly buttress his ethical criticism of classic texts. His incisive commentary upon the racism embedded in *Huck Finn*, for example, would be immeasurably enriched by a juxtaposition of his reading of this novel with an account of an "ethical" response—his own or someone else's—to the representation of the lives of slaves in *Beloved* or Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*. To be sure, as Booth himself points out, a critical discussion of any text is no substitute for the actual narrative encounter itself. One very important type of ethical criticism is accomplished when a reader "corrects" the version of reality tendered in one text by counterposing it with the lived experience of another "rival" world with which it is "in dialogue" (344). Nonetheless, by refraining from describing how attitudes or knowledge gained from an encounter with an "emancipated" text intersect with those gained from an encounter with a "recovered" text, Booth leaves the reader with the impression that the ethical critic's presumably enlightened judgmental stance derives from principle alone, rather than from the experience that shapes and alters principle. No doubt one's lived experience—such as many of us have had in recent decades with social movements against racism and sexism—is the best teacher of such principles. But we cannot underestimate the role played by exposure to texts that embody and articulate the ethical values at the heart of such movements, providing practical experiences of a valuable if different kind.

To ask the question, then, How might Frederick Douglass tell the "story" of Jim? is not to substitute literature for life, but to ask how the representation of social practices in Twain's novel might be subjected to scrutiny through the lens of a narrative particularly empowered to tell us things about those practices that Twain himself could never have known. Posing this question entails a risk, however. For it exposes Twain's novel to an ethical criticism perhaps more searching than any criticism derivable from an examination of implied social beliefs embedded within the "text itself." The juxtaposition of Douglass with Twain might require not only a careful consideration of what is represented in the text, as Booth does so ably, but also a consideration of what is excluded—namely, a depiction of the institution of slavery (including the whipings, the daily humiliations, the break-breaking labor, the emotional pain, the psychological alienation) that would render plausible Jim's decision to cut all his social ties and take off down the river. The risk entailed here, in short, is that, after his ethical scrutiny "by" Douglass, Twain might in fact never fully recover from the shock: the terms "classic" and "wondrous" that Booth lovingly (if ambivalently) bestows upon *Huck Finn* might indeed get stuck in the mouth. The impact of considering at length the "ethical criticism" offered by a text that is both noncanonical and oppositional, in short, might be to demonstrate that the "rival" worlds offered in the two books are not simply in dialogue, but in conflict—political conflict. It might be impossible to continue to cherish the former if one takes seriously the ethical burden of the latter.

For Booth to have included more extended discussions of the ethical criticism embedded in texts by ethnic minority and working-class writers would not simply have called into question his abiding veneration of the classics; it would also have put in a new light the aesthetic criteria for adjudicating literary value that justify this veneration. Booth notes at one point that "[w]hat we all admire (though the details of our admiration vary tremendously) are works that are either consistent with themselves, and thus in some sense unified, or works that acknowledge their own inconsistencies and thus reflect a genuine encounter with recalcitrant materials" (193–94). Jane Austen undertakes an exemplary feat of ethical criticism in *Emma,* he claims, because she ably deploys the conventions of sentimental romance in constructing an emotionally and aesthetically satisfying plot at the same time that she subtly undermines these conventions by refusing to narrate scenes of romantic fulfillment, substituting instead ironic summaries and laconic judgments. Rather than attacking completeness and closure, in other words, Austen indicates her dissatisfaction with the ideologies embedded in conventions.
In positing that "we" all "admire" works that are either consistent and unified or at least self-conscious in their inconsistency and disunity, Booth is arguing in a polemical context. His antagonist is the currently fashionable notion that rupture or inconsistency or disunity is in itself a sign that a text has made a "genuine" ethical encounter with social reality. I readily grant his point, as well as his judgment of the particular feminist strengths of *Emma*. But I question whether ethical criticism should place as high a premium upon unity (or upon self-consciousness regarding disunity) as Booth suggests. For what is the ethical critic to make of a writer such as Harriet Wilson, who, in *Our Nig*, attempted to construct a bildungsroman around her agonized and profoundly restricted life as "free black" in a "white house, North"? Or, to expand the analysis to another black woman writer not so visibly harpered by the particularities of her own experience, what should the ethical critic make of such an accomplished and sophisticated writer as Jessie Redmon Fauset, who, in * Plum Bun*, also attempted to enlist the conventions of the bildungsroman to recount the ironically self-defeating life of a light-skinned woman trying to "pass" in the New York of the 1920s? Did not the very requirements of the genre within which they were working—the notion that character is fate, for example, or that selfhood entails the attainment of autonomy—run counter to the social experience these writers wished to describe? Does the "ill fit" between subject matter and form simply reflect upon Wilson's or Fauset's lack of skill with plot or characterization? Or might it point to the ideological premises of the presumably "formal" qualities in a successful bildungsroman—namely, the notion that we are largely free to choose the selves we become? And, if this is true, might not it be appropriate to view genre itself as implicitly political—and problematic—for large numbers of writers possessing little if any access to such assumptions? And, if *this* is true, should not the literary standards that presuppose unity and wholeness as an "aesthetic" value be themselves subjected to ethical scrutiny? Is adequate recognition of the difficulties posed by conventional forms to marginalized or oppositional writers granted by Booth's stipulation that these writers' conflictual relation to these forms should be articulated as a matter of conscious concern and control? To raise such questions is not, I repeat, to enshrine "incoherence, incongruity, or uncontrolled dissonance" (198n). It is, however, to suggest another way in which noncanonical writers can provide ethical instruction. Such writers may not only reveal submerged aspects of social reality but also query the political presuppositions undergirding the literary conventions through which that reality is ordinarily represented.

In short, Booth's abstention from any serious or extended encounter with the problems raised by the recent movement to open up the canon has the effect of isolating ethical criticism from politics. Booth's passion for the classics, his conviction that they deserve the most serious ethical commentary, enables him to tease out many of their points of political vulnerability. Yet this very loyalty prevents him from turning his attention to whole sets of texts that provide a fascinating plurality of ethical standpoints from which to criticize not only the implied ethical contents of classic works but also the ideological premises of classic forms. The narrowing of the domain of relevant literary texts entails the narrowing of the domain of relevant ethical issues. Ethics is collapsed into politics only at the cost of obscuring the various types of morality or immorality that can accompany the act of reading.

*The Company We Keep* would benefit not only from a broader sense of literary tradition but also from a consideration of more, and different, ethical standards that might be brought to bear in ethical judgments of classic texts. My second major complaint about Booth's depoliticizing of ethics is that he does not adequately introduce considerations of social class into his discussion of the ethical critic's strategic practice. For, with the exception of the brief—though powerful—analysis of class bigotry in *imentos* that I mentioned above, Booth refrains from raising questions about the representation of classes and class hierarchy throughout the book. Of course, Booth's defenders, seeing where I am heading (ah! here comes the Marxist!), might interrupt me here, arguing that, in faulting Booth for his failure to address these issues, I am simply disappointed that he does not happen to share my particular ethics. A writer's failure to exhibit sensitivity to inequalities stemming from social class, they might declare, may simply not be Booth's particular concern. This absence does not imperil the integrity of Booth's argument, these critics might continue, for he explicitly states that his own ethics may not coincide with those of other ethical critics and that he is simply attempting to delineate the parameters within which *any* act of ethical criticism can be performed, regardless of its specific social content. Booth's preponderant emphasis upon a feminist critical approach, they would conclude, is not to be taken as prescriptive, but simply as exemplary: the strategies of feminist criticism should be taken as "representative" of those of ethical criticism generally, rather than as constituting an exhaustive repertory of specific social values.

I acknowledge that different critics may wish to emphasize different ethical concerns as they consider literary texts. But I question whether the strategies of feminist ethical criticism can be taken as "representa-
tive” of all ethical criticism, especially a criticism based on considerations of class. Feminist and Marxist analyses share, of course, certain important concerns: both stipulate that the classics contain egregious instances of ethical blindness and, moreover, that this blindness matters in interpretation and evaluation. Nonetheless, feminist and Marxist criticism do not always adopt similar critical maneuvers. To be sure, gender issues are elided in whole genres or authorial oeuvres addressed to male readerships or focusing on male experience (I think here of Westerns, various types of adventure narratives, and the sea novels of Joseph Conrad). More often than not, however, women are at least a marginal presence in even the most sexist of the classics. Sexist representation usually takes the form of denigration or distortion, not of wholesale omission. Feminist criticism thus generally addresses itself to the ideological implications of something that is represented. An examination of personal interactions among characters, narratorial intervention, and other textual features will ordinarily yield up sufficient material for the feminist critic to formulate an ethical commentary.

Feminist criticism has developed useful strategies for examining such concerns, and in what I am about to say I in no way intend to detract from its achievement. But certain types of feminist criticism end up reinforcing the notion that the ethics of a text are projected through its representation of personalities; understanding the portrayal of the personal is the key to grappling with the political. Criticism emphasizing issues of class, by contrast, is more frequently confronted with absence; in any number of classics, the vast numbers of peasant and proletarian producers who enable the very existence of the narrative’s interacting elite characters—male and female—are simply invisible. To be sure, this is not always the case; Joyce and Lawrence give us enough of working-class experience to what our appetites, while Dickens treats problems of class hierarchy by boldly juxtaposing characters from diverse social levels. But generally the working class figures in literary texts in the bourgeois “great tradition” as an invisible presence. In Edith Wharton’s House of Mirth, the fastidious Selden may intuit that “a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce [Lily Bart]” (7). But this recognition does not seem to compel Wharton herself to grant more than the most passing recognition to such sacrifices or to explore the mystery of their cause. In The House of Mirth, as in a great number of classic novels, the reader is left with the distinct impression that, however fully a character’s personality and values may be grounded in his or her social environment (and Wharton is, it should be granted, better than many on this point), that environment itself is an autonomous world. This world may be juxtaposed in interesting ways with the world of the laboring and the poor, but is in no significant way dependent upon it. One result of this fetishization of wealth and leisure, I would argue, is a fetishization of morality. Questions of alienation, oppression, and injustice—questions that are political to the core—take shape as “moral” issues, embodied in the “good” and “bad” polarities signaled by the elite characters who ordinarily constitute the text’s ethical spectrum.

If it is true that class is often obscured in classic texts in ways that gender is not, then the ethical project of the critic concerned with issues of class is in certain crucial ways very different from that of the feminist critic. The Marxist critic treats as political both textual presences and textual absences. The final ethical judgments the Marxist critic arrives at may thus diverge significantly from those reached by the feminist critic; the “correct” ethical judgment of a text is not a preexistent given, waiting to be discovered by the enlightened critic, but a contested terrain, where different political premises require different critical maneuvers and produce potentially divergent ethical conclusions. As Booth ably demonstrates, the various textual presences in Emma—both explicit and implicit—allow the feminist critic to conclude that Austen offers an emancipatory ironic commentary that recuperates her for contemporary feminism. But what are we to say of Austen’s (or, Austen’s narrator’s) blithe remark that Emma had the “good fortune” to be possessed of great wealth? There are no represented elements in the novel that invite us to interpret this statement ironically. Austen’s attitude toward the plot of romantic fulfillment can be inferred from the subtle interplay of action with tone; but the author’s silence on the question of the sources, and legitimacy, of “fortunes” suggests that the conditions of their being got and spent are irrelevant to her ethical universe. For the reader who is concerned with ethical criteria encompassing considerations of both gender and class, then, assessing Emma is deeply problematic. If this reader’s discontent with Austen’s blindness to the implications of early nineteenth-century class hierarchy is then fueled by encounters with texts that describe what class hierarchy meant in the lives of real people—Marx’s searing account of the consequences of the enclosure movement in Capital, volume 1, for example, or Mayhew’s description of the urban poor—it may become still more difficult for the ethical critic to respond with pleasure to Austen’s account of self-discovery and love among the leisure classes. Like Huck Finn after its
encounter with Frederick Douglass, *Emma* after its meeting with Marx or Mayhew may never be so “wonderful” again.

No doubt the argument could be made that any ethical critic who relies so heavily upon a judgment of what is not represented in a text is a spoilsport in the grooves of academe, anachronistically condemning great cultural monuments and, moreover, raising considerations that are fundamentally irrelevant to the sort of criticism Booth is describing. It is one thing to criticize a writer for failing to grant full humanity to characters who actually appear in the pages of a text: at least then the “ethics” of the text can be seen as consisting in its failure to grapple fully with its own données. It is quite another thing, however, to insist that authors talk about something that did not even occur to them. Indeed, the argument might be—and here a frown might be cast toward Booth as well as the Marxist—that the above comments on Austen, Marx, and Mayhew demonstrate why the whole enterprise of ethical criticism is of questionable value to begin with. Once the door is opened to the proposition that critics have the right—indeed, the responsibility—to inject social values into literary evaluation, can it ever be closed again? Is there no domain of aesthetic evaluation exempt from political judgment?

I would respond that the Marxist arguments I have raised are entirely compatible with Booth’s inquiry into the ethics of reading and criticism; to an extent I expect that Booth would back me up. Certainly he would grant little validity to the argument that complaints about earlier writers’ failure to be aware of the realities of exploitation are irrelevant or ahistorical. As he notes with regard to the potential accusation that he is imposing a 1980s-based ethics of gender relations upon Rabelais, “The only ‘Rabelais’ I can be fully responsible to confronts me here and now. I do not possess Rabelais’s works then; I possess them, or they attempt to possess me, now. I read him as I read anyone: in my own time. Whatever he does to me will be done within my frame of values, not his” (412). Where Booth and I would part company, however (and I would regret to see him go, for he is such a splendid company to keep) would probably be around a disagreement regarding my claim that the forms of ethical criticism are inextricably bound up with their substance. He would assert, I suspect, that the particular ethics guiding a given critic’s act of ethical criticism are logically separable from the adopted strategy of critique. I, by contrast, would insist that different social values necessitate different sorts of inquiries and that certain specific ethical contents—central among these being a full recognition of the ideological workings of assumptions regarding gender, race, and class—are indispensable to a “full” ethical engagement with a text, one that accounts not only for what the text represents but also for what it sloughs over and obscures. The critic who ignores such considerations, I would argue, runs the risk of dissolving ethics into a matter of personal sensitivity, obscuring the important political questions at stake when we encounter texts and traditions that purport to represent a culture to itself.

Much of *The Company We Keep* is given over to a discussion of the logical grounds upon which ethical criticism makes its claim to legitimacy. Near the beginning of the book, Booth asks, “Can we hope to find a criticism that can respect variety and yet offer knowledge about why some fictions are worth more than others?” (30). The argument that follows offers an eloquent refutation of the notion that ethically critical can be nothing more than the imposition of subjective value judgments upon literary texts and traditions. There is, Booth emphatically argues, no valid basis for distinguishing between fact and value, interpretation and judgment, nor should we look for one. Even though Booth’s own writing is largely directed toward a rehabilitation of the classic tradition as the object of ethical inquiry, his book serves to legitimate and support the activity of a broad range of canon-busting critics who have been engaging in their own brands of “ethical criticism” for some years now. In many ways Paul Moses is generously vindicated by Booth’s committed response to the issues his colleague posed twenty-five years ago. In this sense, *The Company We Keep*, coming as it does from a critic widely esteemed for his adherence to “traditionalist” values, offers aid and sustenance to the insurgent modes of cultural criticism at a crucial moment in their development. For we should not be overly complacent about the foothold that the proponents of feminist and ethnic studies have gained in literature departments. While presently enjoying considerable prestige, these scholars are coming under increasing attack by cultural conservatives dedicated to expunging the barbarians in our midst and to lampooning “political correctness” as a new McCarthyism. Booth, for all his abiding dedication to the study of the classics, will clearly not allow himself to be enlisted in the conservatives’ ranks. He may not be branded a barbarian or neo-McCarthyite himself, but as time goes by, he may well be seen as a renegade who, by theorizing the inseparability of the ethical from the aesthetic, gives succor and comfort to the mob at the gates.

I hope I have not been looking a gift horse too much in the mouth,
then, when I direct attention to what I think are significant limitations in Booth's ethical program, limitations that are simultaneously ethical and political. For Booth can set forth his version of critique engagée with such aplomb—and can argue that its validation is primarily a logical matter—partly because his book does not raise particularly incendiary political questions. His success in urging the logical integrity of his thesis is a function not so much of his avoidance of politics as it is of his endorsement of a distinctively nonthreatening politics. The antiracism informing Booth's critique of Twain, while powerful within its limits, confines ethical judgment to the domain of stereotyping; it bypasses the more fundamental issues about economic and institutional power that would be raised by such texts as House Made of Dawn or Native Son. The antirelativism informing his discussions of Austen and Rabelais, while perspicacious in its analysis of the limitations on female potentiality projected in classic conventions and texts, speaks to constructions of feminism currently enjoying widespread acceptance (at least at the level of lip service) among middle-class academics. Considerations of class that would emphasize issues of exploitation or the legitimation of class hierarchy are virtually absent from the range of standpoints Booth presents as possible premises for ethical criticism. Booth can collapse politics into ethics because he invokes a version of the political that is inseparable from the moral stance of contemporary liberal humanism. A Marxist version of the political, I hope to have shown, does not simply generate a different series of examples to make the same points. Instead, it places the ethical in tension with the political, requiring that "ethics" themselves—a plural, not a singular noun, we should note—be situated in the conflicted zone of social practice before they be invoked in the process of literary evaluation. Booth sets forth with passion and clarity the assumptions and strategies of an ethical criticism practiced from the vantage point of liberal humanism. Critics further to the left, taking up Booth's cue, need to theorize with equal rigor how ethics are embedded in their own strategic practices of reading, criticism, and evaluation.

Notes

1. The fullest application of Chicago school principles to the study of narrative fiction is Sheldon Sacks, Fiction and the Shape of Belief. Kenneth Burke's various works undertake an imaginative politicization of Aristotelian poetics that explores potentialities only partially realized by Sacks's work and the earlier work of Booth. See, for example, The Philosophy of Literary Form and Counter-Statement.

2. The use of the term bourgeois here refers not specifically to class origins but to a writer's general placement within a philosophical/political tradition that can be loosely described in this way. Clearly the term has somewhat more problematic application to a D. H. Lawrence than to a Jane Austen, but it remains useful in characterizing an overall ideological orientation.

3. My own interpretation of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn does not necessitate such drastic conclusions regarding Twain's racism. While I concede that the portrayal of Jim is stereotyped and involves serious omissions regarding the institution of slavery, I subscribe to the more "ironic" reading of the novel that Booth dismisses as overly ingenious (470–73). This reading—which is, I believe, amply buttressed by the text, and not simply imposed by 1990s wish fulfillment—does a good deal to salvage Twain for contemporary anti-racist discourse. For antiracist readings of Huck Finn, see Wilding, "The False Freedoms of Huckleberry Finn," in Political Fictions 21–47; and David L. Smith, "Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse," in Leonard, Tenney, and Davis 103–20.

4. I have not directly confronted here the relation of class to race: clearly the remarks I have made about the ways that criticism focusing on questions of class requires special attention to gaps and omissions are also true of criticism focusing on questions of race. Indeed, as my remarks on Huck Finn suggest, a writer's inattention to the position of blacks within the socioeconomic structure is closely related to the invocation of racial stereotypes. In terms of representational presences and absences, class is a good deal more closely aligned with race than it is with gender. Yet the treatment of racism differs from that of class, and shares certain similarities with that of gender, insofar as an ethics of the "personal" can more frequently emerge as central to a text's ideological stance.

Bibliography


