

WAYNE C. BOOTH

*The Rhetoric
of Fiction*

SECOND EDITION



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Foreword to the Second Edition

When my editor at the Press suggested that it was time for a second edition, I at first resisted. Deeply immersed in other projects, why should I neglect them to tinker with—and perhaps even maim—a book that still seemed to be making its way in the world pretty well? I felt no need to retract much of what I had said, yet I knew from experience that, once embarked on a revision, I would never stop short of creating a radically different book. And that would have taken years, because the two decades since 1961 have been without question the richest in the history of studies of narrative.

What changed my mind was thinking about the rapidly aging bibliography. The many students who each year begin their serious study of fiction by using this book as a text are served badly by its silence about those two decades. And so I agreed that, if James Phelan would do the bibliography, I would add “a few pages about two or three of the main developments since 1961.”

Those pages soon expanded, irresistibly, to become the Afterword that now begins on page 401. It will not make sense, I’m afraid, to any reader who has not read the book first. But since its parts are to some degree independent of each other, I have provided a new index, covering the Afterword, Phelan’s bibliography, and the original bibliography. I have also made a few minor changes in the original text, mostly in matters of style.

I include the new index with some misgivings about providing an invitation to those who would rather raid a book than read it. In its relatively fortunate career, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* has suffered its share of raiders, and I now enter once again that forlorn

plea made by all authors who struggle to fit things together: Do try to view the whole vehicle before condemning the hood ornament or the choice of wheel covers.

Some readers who have liked the book have nevertheless complained that it depends on more acquaintance with the world's fiction than anyone but a professional scholar is likely to possess. One friend, a surgeon-who-reads, said, "It's not just the huge number of novels you refer to—it's the way you do it: you seem to expect us to go read all those stories."

I chose to receive that as a compliment; for in a time when too much criticism, pursuing "autonomy," floats off into the Great Inane, with never a reference to anything but its own concept-spinning, there is surely room for a criticism that is openly embedded in and respectful of the stuff that it criticizes. There may be no real problem here, even for the beginning student. After all, every reader of this book knows scores of stories, ranging from fairytales enjoyed in childhood to jokes and gossip shared yesterday with friends. You can simply slot yours in, with your own analyses.

I can't dictate just how many of the stories I discuss must be added to this shared narrative base to make the book work for you. But it obviously won't work well unless you take a detour from time to time to read or re-read one or another of the stories I discuss. The fun will come in testing what I say, not against any given theory you have learned, but rather against your own experience of Boccaccio's "The Falcon," of Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," of Joyce's *Portrait*, of Austen's *Emma*—of whatever story you have recently enjoyed and would like to recommend to me.

Preface to the }
First Edition }

In writing about the rhetoric of fiction, I am not primarily interested in didactic fiction, fiction used for propaganda or instruction. My subject is 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. Though the problems raised by rhetoric in this sense are found in didactic works like *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *1984*, they are seen more clearly in non-didactic works like *Tom Jones*, *Middlemarch*, and *Light in August*. Is there any defense that can be offered, on aesthetic grounds, for an art full of rhetorical appeals? 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. But it takes no very deep analysis to show that the same problems are raised, though in less obvious form, by the disguised rhetoric of modern fiction; when Henry James says that he has invented a *ficelle* because the reader, not the hero, needs a "friend," the ostensibly dramatic move is still rhetorical; it is dictated by the effort to help the reader grasp the work.

I am aware that in pursuing the author's means of controlling his reader I have arbitrarily isolated technique from all of the social and psychological forces that affect authors and readers. For the most part I have had to rule out different demands made by dif-

ferent audiences in different times—the aspect of the rhetorical relationship treated with great acumen by Q. D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Richard Altick in *The English Common Reader*, and Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*. I have even more rigorously excluded questions about the psychological qualities in readers that account for the almost universal interest in fiction—the kind of question dealt with by Simon Lesser in *Fiction and the Unconscious*. Finally, I have had to ignore the psychology of the author and the whole question of how it relates to the creative process. I have, in short, ruled out many of the most interesting questions about fiction. My excuse is that only in doing so could I hope to deal adequately with the narrower question of whether rhetoric is compatible with art.

In treating technique as rhetoric, I may seem to have reduced the free and inexplicable processes of the creative imagination to the crafty calculations of commercial entertainers. The whole question of the difference between artists who consciously calculate and artists who simply express themselves with no thought of affecting a reader is an important one, but it must be kept separate from the question of whether an author's work, regardless of its source, communicates itself. The success of an author's rhetoric does not depend on whether he thought about his readers as he wrote; if "mere calculation" cannot insure success, it is equally true that even the most unconscious and Dionysian of writers succeeds only if he makes us join in the dance. By the very nature of my task I cannot do justice to those sources of artistic success which could never be calculatedly tapped, but one can accept this limitation without denying the importance of the incalculable or confining the study to works whose authors thought consciously of their readers.

I could not pursue this study at all without moving far from the secure harbor of my own special training. Careful as I have tried to be, I know that experts in each period or author are sure to find errors of fact or interpretation that no expert would commit. But I hope that my larger argument does not stand or fall on whether the reader agrees with all of my analyses. They are intended as illustrative, not definitive, and though the book includes, I think,

some contributions to the reading of individual works, each critical conclusion could have been illustrated with many other works. If there is anything to my case, the experienced reader will be able to supply illustrations to replace those that seem to him faulty. My goal is not to set everyone straight about my favorite novelists but rather to free both readers and novelists from the constraints of abstract rules about what novelists must do, by reminding them in a systematic way of what good novelists have in fact done.

My debts to published criticism are acknowledged as fully as possible in footnotes and bibliography. For more personal help I want to thank Cecil Holvik—always much more than a typist—and those who gave detailed criticism to earlier drafts: Ronald S. Crane, Leigh Gibby, Judith Atwood Guttman, Marcel Gutwirth, Laurence Lerner, John Crowe Ransom, and—draft by draft, year by year—my wife. I am grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for the grant which enabled me to complete the first draft, and to Earlham College for the sabbatical leave during which I have completed the last.

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"It is the first necessity of the novelist's position that he make himself pleasant."—TROLLOPE

"My task . . . is to make you see."—CONRAD

"Until these things are judged and given each its appointed place in the whole scheme, they have no meaning in the world of art."—KATHERINE MANSFIELD, protesting the method of Dorothy Richardson

"The author makes his readers, just as he makes his characters."—HENRY JAMES

"I write; let the reader learn to read."—MARK HARRIS

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PART I

Artistic Purity and the Rhetoric of Fiction