Literary Criticism and the Pursuit of Character[1]

Wayne C. Booth

The worst possible rhetorical situation is that of a speaker who joins a conference a day or so after it has begun and is then expected to say something that both fits the conference and has not been said before. Whether having the cocktail hour beforehand helps or hinders remains to be seen. I just want to make clear at the beginning that I don't pretend to know how the ethical criticism of literature that interests me might prove useful to members of the Society for Health and Human Values. Of course, in my heart of hearts I think that the criticism I pursue should be useful to everybody of every age in all climes. But I'll leave it to you to discover the connections between my way of dealing with stories and your ways of dealing with medical ethics.

In talking about stories and the ethics of storytelling and listening, one must begin with a story. Here is a true one that I have written out here for the first time, preparing for tonight. And for the first time, I've allowed memory to give the story a title: "The Artful Dodger."

Many years ago my family was riding with my stepbrother's family through a remote part of rural France. My stepbrother Hank was then a doctor with the U.S. Army, assigned to the troops who were still stationed there. Hank's wife had insisted that we take a side trip in the late afternoon to see one more ruin, and as dusk came on Hank had started to blame her for our driving strange roads after dark and in a slight fog.

His worry didn't seem to slow him down any, and I was not only depressed by their quarreling but also uneasy about his fast and furious driving: after all, I knew something about the fatality statistics on the highways of France. Suddenly ahead we saw what looked like trouble, and as we slowed we could see that there had indeed been a crash, involving at least three cars. I could see one figure lying awkwardly to the right of the road and other figures standing beside it, trying to flag

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us down. One of us in the car, I forget who, said, "We'd better stop." But Hank said—and I'll never forget it—"We're not going to stop. An American doctor can only get in trouble trying to do anything in a situation like that." He accelerated past the scene, while some of us protested—no doubt quite weakly.

We were all silent in the car for quite a while. Finally I said, "We should have stopped, Hank. You might have helped." Hank got furious with me, shouted, "Didn't you hear what I said? We're not supposed to stop; we're not allowed to doctor French patients." He paused. "Besides, it was probably a faked scene, an attempt at highway robbery."

End of story.

But of course that's the end of the story only if we remain silent about it. If you and I decide to talk about it, if we engage in the kind of literary criticism that I think should be the center of literary studies, the story can go on and on and on. Or perhaps we should say another collection of stories begins: the stories of what each of us makes out of the story and of what the story does to us. Each of us, as we participate in conversation about such a story, constructs a new episode in the always-to-be-continued story of our own moral and intellectual development.

My wife, when she asks tomorrow about what happened here tonight, may say something like, "So you began by telling the story of Hank's behavior that night, to all those students of medical ethics? What was their response? Did they agree with you that telling such stories can have ethical consequences? Did any of them disagree with your claim that Hank's decision exhibited moral failure?"

[I then asked for a show of hands: "How many of you feel that Hank failed a moral test?" Almost everyone promptly raised a hand. "How many of you think he simply behaved as one should in such a situation, obeying an official rule?" A few hands were raised. "How many are still making up your minds?" Three or four hands went up.]

We see by your responses, of all kinds, just how deeply ethical criticism of stories depends on individual responses and how it is always embedded in our preconceptions of what is right and wrong.

Now I'm sure you know that this kind of talk—about the effects of stories on our lives and particularly on our conversations about how life ought to be lived—is not the dominant mode of criticism on the academic scene today. When we open our critical journals, we find a lot of other, quite different questions, presumably more interesting and intellectually respectable, that could be asked of my story. We could, for

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example, classify my story into its proper kind, and then develop a theory of kinds, using some version of Aristotle or Vladimir Propp or Northrop Frye. Or we could, more fashionably, deconstruct it, showing how, as its teller, I did not have a clue about its true meaning, because my ostensible surface intention—a fable of moral failure—was undercut by hidden metaphors quite beyond my control and by my unconsciously self-protective role in the story. "Why did the teller not take a stronger line, if, as the story implies, he would himself have been willing to stop if he had been a doctor encountering the same scene?" Following another popular line, we could trace the history of such fables and compare the style of earlier fables with the style, or lack of style, in this one; or we could study its implications for cultural history or for international relations. Or we could ask, was the story indeed historically true? Was there a genuine Hank, and who was he? Did Booth's telling treat the protagonist fairly or exaggerate his faults? And so on, through the history of critical fashions, which until this century almost always included moral judgments and in recent decades has almost always ignored or obscured them.[2]

It won't surprise anyone who's read even a few pages of my book, *The Company We Keep*, to hear me say that none of those critical possibilities, though each of them might be valid for some purposes, is as important to me as the questions I began with, which can be summarized like this: Was the experience of telling and hearing the story an experience worth having? That question can be split into three:

1. Was the experience worth having as it occurred: were you wasting your time, was I wasting mine, and thus were we wasting our lives, as we lived the story?

2. Were the after effects, the load of consequences that we carried away, good or bad?

3. Will any of us behave better or worse tomorrow for having heard that story?

Such questions are so hard to answer that it's no wonder critics throw up their hands about them and turn to other, more manageable matters. The second one, about consequences, is especially difficult. Who could possibly trace through the world the consequences of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, say, deciding whether that novel has done more good or harm in the world? Lots of ethical critics have

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used *Werther* as an example of a work that indeed did tangible harm because legend has it that its publication raised the suicide rate of young men throughout Europe. But even if we could somehow find conclusive evidence that *Werther* did that, would it prove that it was a bad book? Suppose we could prove—to take another example—that recent studies are correct when they claim that TV stories designed to reduce teenage suicide are actually followed by an increase in suicides. What would follow from the proof? That we should have no programs that deal with suicide? Surely not.

But the truth is that dealing with consequences is so difficult that we are rightly led to concentrate instead on that other question, also difficult but in some ways more tractable: Can you and I, talking together about this story, find ethically productive life together? Do stories enrich our moral lives as we talk about them, as we discuss whether or not the time spent living with the story was a good time? Was the company you kept with the author of "The Artful Dodger" good company? And if good, good in what way? In the way a barroom anecdote is good, gripping and ending in a laugh? In the way that a moral fable is good, ending in the listener's sense of moral change? Or in a sense that includes both the pleasure of entertainment and a sense of moral worth but also the curious experience we have when the time we spend with others seems to provide a simple clear answer to the question, What is life for?

Before looking more closely at the three kinds of good that company stories can provide, we ought to have on board here something a bit richer than my feeble little anecdote. Let's consider a poem by W. H. Auden, one that he sometimes called "Surgical Ward":

> They are and suffer; that is all they do:
> A bandage hides the place where each is living,
> His knowledge of the world restricted to
> A treatment metal instruments are giving.
>
> They lie apart like epochs from each other
> (Truth in their sense is how much they can bear;
> It is not talk like ours but groans they smother),
> From us remote as plants: we stand elsewhere.
>
> For who when healthy can become a foot?
> Even a scratch we can't recall when cured,
> But are boisterous in a moment and believe

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Reality is never injured, cannot
Imagine isolation: joy can be shared,
And anger, and the idea of love.[3]

Now I'm happy to have had perhaps as many as five hours of good talk with friends about this poem, talk that included, fairly early, the discovery of an explanation of such minor matters as why Auden changes his rhymes from regular, in the octet, to off rhymes in the sestet: foot/not, cured/shared, believe/love. But the main direction of our talk about the poem has been about just who these healthy folks are—the "we" of the poem who stand elsewhere, observing the surgical ward—and where that elsewhere actually is. We've not been able to resist asking what it could possibly mean to say that we stand elsewhere, since we know, don't we, that each of us will stand, ultimately, just where the suffering surgery patients lie.

When we pursue that question even a short distance, we find ourselves asking, Where does Auden place himself in all this? He is obviously standing back from the experience, facing his sheet of paper with the calm control of a poet who is master of his material: not sick; not, for that matter, in a hospital as an observer, but at most remembering a visit in tranquility; or perhaps even ill, for all we know, but surely not, not really, facing the picture of surgical suffering as one does when actually walking into a room of suffering patients.

These differences between four characters—the portrayed sufferers, the "us" of the poem, the "I" who is the implied writer playing with his rhyme scheme and other poetic effects, and the "real" Auden, who may or may not have known the feelings of a patient when he wrote "Surgical Ward"—these four characters, and the differences among them, complicate the scene of every ethical conversation: as listeners to or re-creaters of any story, we can respond to each of these four in widely different ways.

Think for a moment of the similar four engaged personae (the portrayed characters, the observers, the author implied by the telling, and the flesh-and-blood person behind the author), as they are embodied in my opening story. There are first of all the characters in the story, the main one obviously Hank; second and more dominating, the narrator as portrayed by the third character, the current author, Wayne Booth, retelling the story in 1990, long after the event and with rhetorical moves that deserve to be queried critically; and finally, the flesh-and-blood Wayne Booth, who implicitly claims, in his implied version, virtues of compassion and courage that he denies to his

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protagonist, Hank. Yet, for all you can tell from the story itself, Booth may behave in his daily dealings much less morally than Hank in the story.[4]

This point requires us to think a bit about another bunch of characters on the scene of telling—the characters that we become as listeners before, during, and after our listening. Just think of the multiplicity of roles you have played today and of how your implied character has shifted from moment to moment throughout the day. At the reception I heard a couple of you exchanging dirty stories; I feel pretty sure that you did *not* tell them in your prepared talks. I heard one of you complaining about how your teaching has dried up. Others were engaging in the most trivial kind of cocktail chatter. And then suddenly you all come into this hall and start pretending, with me, that your whole soul is devoted to serious inquiry into the ethics of storytelling and listening. Some of you—it is just barely possible that *some* of you have committed rather dastardly deeds during this day or week, deeds at least as bad as Hank's. (I doubt it, because that kind of person would probably not be here.) Yet here you all are, engaging more or less seriously in moral inquiry, at least politely pretending to identify with my enterprise.

Well, are we all, always, people who spend their whole time talking and thinking deeply about morality? No, we are not: we play different moral roles at different times, and we could thus be said to be a bunch of hypocrites here at this moment, as we implicitly claim to be serious about moral matters.

I must dramatize this point one more time by telling you now another story. This one I take from a recent anthology of obscene Ozark folktales. Its title is the same as the title of the book: "Pissing in the Snow."

> One time there was two farmers that lived out on the road to Carico. They was always good friends, and Bill's oldest boy had been a-sparking one of Sam's daughters. Everything was going fine till the morning they met down by the creek, and Sam was pretty goddam mad. "Bill," says he, "from now on I don't want that boy of yours to set foot on my place."
>
> "Why, what's he done?" asked the boy's daddy.
>
> "He pissed in the snow, that's what he done, right in front of my house!"
>
> "But surely, there ain't no great harm in that," Bill says.
>
> "No harm!" hollered Sam. "Hell's fire, he pissed so it spelled Lucy's name, right there in the snow!"

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> "The boy shouldn't have done that," says Bill. "But I don't see nothing so terrible bad about it."
>
> "Well, by God, I do!" yelled Sam. "There was two sets of tracks! And besides, don't you think I know my own daughter's handwriting?"[5]

Now obviously some of you thought that was funnier than some others did: you willingly became the listener that the story implicitly demands. I saw that some of you were standing back a bit from the story, refusing to laugh as hard as others were. I assume that you were refusing to give up your usual ethical stance and become the listener implied by the tale. It was probably the first time you've heard a public speaker using the word *pissing*. But I ask those of you who enjoyed it to ask yourselves who you became as you listened, and then to ask how that character relates to the character who listened to Auden's poetic story of the hospital visit or to the moralistic tale with which I began. Even as you listened to my story, you were forced by the situation itself to be more than a single auditor: you sat there, in your flesh-and-blood reality, pretending not to be tired and hungry at the end of the day.

But insofar as you really listened, you also became a kind of idealized version of yourself, concentrated on the telling moment and engaging, with the narrator, in the narrative line and its implicit moral questions; then again you became the critical self, looking back on it, perhaps modifying the effects of the story by the thinking I was trying to induce.

Now if any of this makes sense, it is clear that the task of determining whether a given story, or a given reading of a story, is ethically defensible is much more complex than is usually assumed. With at least four kinds of character implicit in every act of telling and the same number implicit in every act of reading, listening, or retelling, the possible ethical effects of any one story become far too various to be summed up with a flat judgment: ethically bad for all people in all situations or ethically good for all people in all situations.

But in my remaining time I'll reduce the seeming relativism of such a statement by claiming that some kinds of stories, unlike my story of Hank or "Pissing in the Snow" or even "Surgical Ward," contain within themselves a kind of ethical education that makes them almost certain to be elevating for any reader who is qualified to understand the stories at all. The claim is complicated and controversial. A lot of critics on our scene would claim that everything depends on the reader. But what I want to say is that although a lot depends on the reader, much of the quality of the experience depends on the quality

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of the text itself.[6] Though the claim can never be made decisively, especially in short space, I want to nudge you to continue thinking about it—and the best way to do that is to look at the ethical power of a literary work you all may have read, willingly or unwillingly.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has sometimes been criticized as shallow, as mere entertainment, as lacking in profundity. Since it is so much fun to read, from beginning to end, it is easy to overlook the powerful ethical force that comes from identifying with the implied author's values as we listen to her story. For that is precisely, I think, the most powerful effect of this novel—an effect that subsumes the glorious pleasure of seeing Elizabeth and Darcy, by far the most admirable characters of the book, find love and marriage at the end. It is the implied Jane Austen we travel with, even as we in a sense travel with Elizabeth, seeing everything except her own mistakes through her central point of view. And as we travel with her, we inevitably take on—that is to say, the implied reader part of us takes on—the role of taking on, at least for the nonce, the central values of that idealized woman. We join the implied character who, through Austen's choices, has been granted every virtue, including a sarcastic wit, and purged of every vice, including even the obvious faults that the flesh-and-blood Jane Austen must have had, such as a wicked, even cruel contempt for the fools and knaves to which life itself had subjected her.

Let's read a bit of the famous proposal scene that I've distributed here, the one in which the foolish, egotistical clergyman, Mr. Collins, proposes to our heroine, Elizabeth. As I read, ask yourself where you are required to stand as you watch the scene—or, to put it the other way, who you are asked to become as you read.

Elizabeth has already made it clear that she does not accept Collins's advances. We have been told directly by the narrator, and we have seen, that he is an egotistical oaf. But Elizabeth feels that she might as well "get it over with, as soon and as quietly as possible," and she politely listens as he begins his proposal (Volume I, Chapter XIX):

> "Believe me, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections. You would have been less amiable in my eyes had there *not* been this little unwillingness; but allow me to assure you that I have your respected mother's permission for this address. You can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse, however your natural delicacy may lead you to dissemble; my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out

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as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying—and moreover for coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife, as I certainly did."

The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him farther, and he continued:

"My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances, (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford—between our pools at quadrille, while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh's footstool, that she said, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry.—Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way. This is my advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her.' Allow me, by the way, to observe, my fair cousin, that I do not reckon the notice and kindness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh as among the least of the advantages in my power to offer. You will find her manners beyond any thing I can describe; and your wit and vivacity I think must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite. Thus much for my general intention in favour of matrimony; it remains to be told why my views were directed to Longbourn instead of my own neighbourhood, where I assure you there are many amiable young women."[7]

And on he goes for a while, finally arriving at:

"And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents, which will

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> not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to. On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent; and you may assure yourself that no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married."[8]

At which point Elizabeth has had all she can take, and interrupts—"You are too hasty, Sir. You forget that I have made no answer"[9]—to which Collins waves his hand, saying that he's quite aware how young ladies always turn down the first offer, out of politeness.

Now I think it's impossible to enjoy that scene fully—I invite you of course to return to the novel itself and read everything that leads up to it—without one of two responses to Mr. Collins's inanity: either he is totally different from me, the reader, far beneath me in moral and intellectual grace, in which case I just stand with Jane Austen as she laughs at him; or—and I can remember this reaction from when I was a young reader—I fear that I may be a bit like him and swear that I will work to become less like him. Lord protect me from my own egoistical follies, one may think. In either case, the effect is to reinforce or establish a desire to be the kind of person who does not fall into that kind of trap.

To say as much leads us back to the two questions with which we began: the question of ethical consequences and the question of the quality of life lived while one reads, regardless of consequences. As for consequences, it would be foolish to claim that readers of Jane Austen are always turned into generous-spirited, sensitive, observant souls just by reading her; our self-centeredness and the habits we've developed in life preceding any act of listening are not likely to be transformed by one book or even by a barrage of such books. Yet I am convinced that such works have the power to build something like such consequences for the right readers, especially younger readers, at just the right time. In my book, I list at one point responses I received when asking people to tell me of a single book that changed their lives; just about everybody had one.

But I am even more interested in a subtler consequence: the education of the moral imagination that such passages can achieve. We may not see many radical changes of overt behavior, but most of us have experienced the radical changes in our awareness of moral issues that such works can produce—especially when their influence is extended year after year, book after book, decade after decade. Just ask yourself what your own awareness of the rights and wrongs of social converse would be if you had never listened to stories or read them on

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your own. Of course the very power I am talking about can be a power for bad as well as good: the emulation of an implied author's value systems that we practice can be disastrous if it is of a disastrously maimed implied author. But that's a story for another occasion.

In any case, for the second time tonight I want to dodge the tough question of consequences and conclude with emphasis on the quality of life lived while reading. Think back for a moment to the quality of life you lived while I was reading you "Pissing in the Snow." It wasn't bad, was it? It certainly ain't gonna hurt you none, really. Right? But am I stretching things to claim further that as we shared that story we were living a life that—while perfectly OK for moments of diversion—would be disastrous for our souls if we dwelt there always or habitually?

I'm not sure of that point. I've thought about it a good deal as I've read more of those Ozark tales and looked at the picture of the editor on the cover, a man who must have spent most of his working hours for years and years gathering one after another of these tales of sexual and scatological comedy:

> One time there was a country boy come a-walking into town, and he made a bee-line for the whore house. The woman begun to tell him . . .[10]
>
> One time a young fellow was going to marry a girl up on Panther Creek, but they hadn't done no screwing yet. The girl seen him taking a leak out behind the barn, so then she . . .[11]

You may or may not be, like me, a reader who gets hooked and can't resist listening to the ends of stories that begin that way. I've read every tale in that collection, most of them with some strong amusement. My main point tonight is that though a book like that might be therapeutic for one of your patients who is in the doleful dumps, I would think any life impoverished that had lost the capacity to enter either the radically different world of Jane Austen's work or the world of conversational pleasures in which we feel free to explore our reasons for celebrating one world over the other. Talking about "Pissing in the Snow" is finally more rewarding than simply reading or telling it.

What could be more ethically invigorating, whether we spend our time in hospital corridors or in college classrooms, than talking together about the ethical differences of the lives we take on, or take in, when we enter worlds as different as these?

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NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a talk given to the Society for Health and Human Values in 1990. Because of the special nature of the occasion, I have preserved much of the oral style.

2. That claim was a bit truer in 1990 than it is in 2000, as I revise the talk. Ethical criticism of diverse kinds has been reviving—though often employing terms other than *moral* and *ethical*.

3. W. H. Auden, "Sonnet XIV," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1991), 191.

4. For most kinds of ethical criticism the last of these, the flesh-and-blood author, is not crucial: I can usually enter fully into what an art work offers without worrying too much about how the creator behaved when not writing art works. But not always: I recently learned that Schubert seems to have been a confirmed child molester. Can I listen to his music now with quite the same sense of communing purely with a pure soul? I found this afternoon, with WFMT turned on playing his Unfinished Symphony, that I could not. Critical questions kept intruding.

5. Vance Randolph, ed., *Pissing in the Snow and Other Ozark Folktales* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 5. From the preface to the story, "Pissing in the Snow": "Told by Frank Hembree, Galena Mo., April, 1945. He heard it in the late 1890's. J. L. Russell, Harrison, Ark., spun me the same yarn in 1950; he says it was told near Green Forest, Ark., about 1885" (p. 5).

6. I am here of course implicitly attacking the "death of the author" school that at the time was prominent among academic critics: those who, like Foucault and Derrida, were claiming that all we have is the text, which yields no fixed meaning whatever and has no relation to any author's intentions. Most critics have by now recognized that the "death" claim was much exaggerated. See Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

7. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Tony Tanner (London: Penguin Books, 1972; reprint 1985), 146–48.

8. Ibid., 148.

9. Ibid.

10. Randolph, 61.

11. Randolph, 63.

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