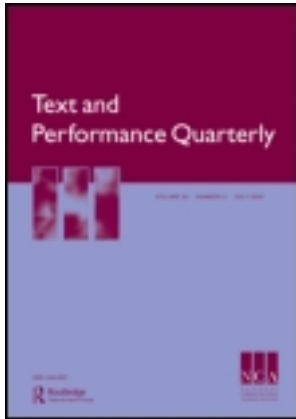


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Publisher: Routledge

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Text and Performance Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpq20>

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To cite this article: Chris Ingraham (2013): The Archivist and Autobiographer: Performing Wayne Booth's Legacy, Text and Performance Quarterly, 33:1, 5-21

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2012.733408>

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The Archivist and Autobiographer: Performing Wayne Booth's Legacy

Chris Ingraham

*Drawing from its author's experience as Wayne Booth's archivist, this essay explores the rhetorical and performative relationship between an archive and its subject's legacy. Archives are fixed collections of historical artifacts that preserve an evidentiary "truth" about their subjects; meanwhile, they are unstable and dynamic spaces where the past is only imperfectly reanimated through a researcher's rhetorical invention. Using Booth's archive and autobiography, *My Many Selves* (2006), this essay suggests Booth's life and scholarship make an especially salient case for theorizing the archive as a performative dialogue wherein a plausible harmony can be achieved among archive, subject, and researcher.*

Keywords: Wayne Booth; Archive; Rhetoric; Performance; Legacy

Dramatis Personae

This is a story with several players. The trick will be telling them apart. Consider our cast: first, the late Wayne Booth, whose exemplary life and scholarship engaged conversations about pluralism, rhetoric, and literary criticism that remain vital to this day; second (because performing from the grave is something of a problem), Wayne Booth's archive, that is, the collection of papers and documents he left behind as a material record of his long life of letters; and finally, Wayne Booth's archivist, the one who put these documents together in a semblance of order. That would be me.

In fall 2001, when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, Booth hired me to collect and organize his "papers." After five decades of consummate work as teacher, scholar, and dean in Hyde Park, Booth was donating a lifetime's accumulation of personal documents to the university's archives. My job was to set it all straight—before the collection moved to the Regenstein Library's rare books department, where it is housed to this day. That experience, coupled with my

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subsequent apprenticeship under Booth's tutelage, his death in 2005, and the posthumous publication of his autobiography a year later, has helped to refine my thinking about the performative nature of *legacy*—about what one bequeaths one's successors, how this remainder is apportioned, and by whom.

Inasmuch as a personal archive is that place where the material remnants of a life are preserved for posterity, legacy studies necessarily intersect with studies of the archive. The personal archive in particular is a crucial juncture between one's work and life. It provides the most centralized collection of textual evidence from which a researcher might attempt both to draw insights about its subject's public body of work and to gain access to something so intangible as its subject's privately lived experience. Put differently, the personal archive helps reveal many relationships otherwise difficult to trace: between one's public and private character, one's outcomes and intentions, one's inter- and intrapersonal conflicts, one's work's "text" and its context. If Mikhail Bakhtin was right to suggest that our language and ideas are a dynamic amalgam of our experience, social conversations, and research—a phenomenon he calls heteroglossia—and if people contain multitudes, as Walt Whitman suggests, then the personal archive is the place where the evidentiary artifacts of these heteroglossic multitudes interact and co-exist. Researchers who turn to it do so hoping for more intimate access, more clues, perhaps, to make sense of a person or the work for which that person is otherwise known.

And here we confront this paper's main problem. Theorizing the personal archive as a unified collection of texts from which to evaluate and reanimate its subject suggests a direct, unmediated correspondence between the flesh-and-blood person who authored those texts, and the person who those texts seem to imply. The implication that the documents kept in an archive record a coherent, disinterested story about their subject moreover neglects the shifting, dynamic multiplicity of that subject. The positivist association of the archive with the evidence necessary for rational deduction about the past conflicts with more rhetorical notions that the archive is unstable, constructed, and hence resistant of static interpretation. I want to propose that there is, in other words, a tension between the archival impulse to *preserve* a material, albeit inevitably finite, record of the past, and the corresponding assumption that an archive's material record makes it possible for a researcher to *reanimate* that past. The dialectic of preservation (i.e., fixedness) and reanimation (i.e., dynamism) is nowhere more clearly manifest than in the archive. The self-containment of a text and the multiplicity of meaning one might derive from the contexts that bleed into it, raise problems that have troubled rhetoricians, literary scholars, historians, and others for millennia. As it turns out, these are concerns Booth made central to both his career and life, which makes the story of his archive and autobiography—and my complicity in both—an exemplar of how legacies are performed through an inevitably rhetorical and dialogic collaboration. And so the curtains open.

An Archivist Meets His Subject

We met at Regenstein Library, Booth looking like a cowboy academic in cornflower denim jeans and a not-quite-matching denim shirt, the breast pocket of which bore

amoeba splotches of ancient ink stains. With his white, white beard and matching shock of hair he showed me to his office—one of three he had nearby—which in this case served more as a repository for old or finished papers than a location for creating any new ones. The room was not large; it was full. Several hefty manuscript boxes, two bureaucratic-looking and quite unbudging metal filing cabinets, a general covering of foot-high stacks of crooked papers, aberrant piles of books, diaries, Post-Its, note cards, envelopes, scraps, napkins, carbon copies—anything at all that had been written upon—filled the cluttered space. Right away, the impressive array made evident what one means by the phrase, “a life of letters.” That was the first thing that struck me: just how much writing this man had done. And then: *here is a life on paper*.

It was an astonishing moment. To be standing beside a man near the end of his life, looking together upon his life's textual remains. I was dumbfounded and reverent. He was stoic and charming. *This is it*, the moment seemed to say, *here I am*. The sheer quantity of documents was somehow both impossibly large and sadly finite. Then Booth explained that these papers were not even the half of it. In addition to his Regenstein repository, he kept an office in the English department on campus, and one in his nearby home, each holding a similar abundance of personal effects. Although we had met just minutes before, and had talked only briefly on the phone prior to that; although at the time I had read none of Booth's scholarship, literally not a word, and was only vaguely aware that he held an esteemed reputation at the University (though for *what* I had little idea); although, in other words, I knew next to nothing about the man or his work, I suddenly had access to a person in a way that presumably no one but he, or maybe his wife, had ever had before. It was clear immediately that all these “letters” did amount to a “life” thereof. I was awestruck as he handed me the key.

My role, as Booth explained it, was to read through all his papers and put everything in its right place. Diaries here, letters there, manuscripts in these boxes, miscellany in those. It was a task of simple identification, mostly, with little regard for substance or context beyond arranging things as best as possible in some order. Presumably, the university's archivists would do the rest. I think he wanted, for no reason other than his own kindness or embarrassment, to make his papers presentable before he gave them away to be seen by others. That meant that I had an unspoiled look at the documents that would become his archive *while they were still in their organic state*. But even in this state, some of the documents had already been organized, either incidentally, from the grouping that happens in the natural course of their creation and use, or deliberately, from Booth's own efforts at housekeeping. Given his age and proclivities, he wrote almost everything by hand or by typewriter. This meant decades upon decades with a near constant stream of paper; and, over the years, he had developed a system for keeping the deluge in a semblance of order. Once he was ready to move some papers from his desk, he would write a word or two in pencil on the corner and leave the marked papers in an inbox for one of his many graduate assistants, and they would file the papers accordingly in the metal baskets he used as his filing boxes. The words he marked in pencil were

typically proper names or titles (often abbreviated), but sometimes they were ideas or other concise identifying features of inchoate or incomplete projects, books, articles, and the like. It was his way of beginning the process of writing and shaping his life into some organized form.

Many of the papers it was my task to contend with had already been through this taxonomic system. But not all of them had, and it was given me to classify the remainder. This proved tricky. No matter how conscientiously he had seen to the classification of his papers, there were just as many resistant to and without categories to speak of. How to classify, for instance, Christmas cards to or from his children? Did a saved card from his late son, who had died tragically in a car accident at 18, deserve a different category than others? Certainly it carried a different kind of meaning. And where did grocery lists go? Torn snippets of newspaper articles marked with notes? What about phone messages jotted haphazardly on napkins? Or all the to-do lists and doodles? What about his library and all its marginalia (fortunately, this was not part of my job)? But what to do with, say, a loose and unnumbered page of some unidentifiable manuscript that had been separated from its companions? These and other problem cases were my concerns, and they were pervasive. Try though I did to work judiciously within his extant system, just by doing the task asked of me I unavoidably had to interfere with Booth's papers and impose an extrinsic order upon them, inserting *my* order, and perhaps in so doing changing forever the way the papers would be contextualized, understood, and used as evidentiary sources of meaning for anyone consulting them in the future. This was not an apparent concern of his. It became my chief struggle.

But it was not only the unclassified or seemingly unclassifiable papers that posed a challenge. Even those among his documents that had already been neatly filed away in a collaborative process between Booth and his graduate assistants—a heteroglossic process that had gone on for some time before my involvement, then continued differently the moment I interfered with the papers using the more-or-less full discretion Booth had given me—even these already filed documents were susceptible to organizational “mistakes” and inconsistencies, many of which were only retrospectively or contextually evident. For instance, Booth initially may have given various early notes or drafts pencil marks that characterized them as separate and unrelated projects, and they had been filed accordingly, though by the time I saw them it was obvious these discretely categorized papers had eventually become part of work published in a single book and could reasonably be filed together. But should they be? Similarly, ideas that Booth penciled-in one way at first, classifying budding projects along one trajectory, can in the larger context of other drafts and notes be seen as having evolved into other ideas, making it just as sensible to label them in any variety of different ways. When to rearrange and reclassify, when to create new categories or revise old ones, when to accord things more than one classification, and how to do so when of course no single paper could be placed in multiple files at once—these are the challenges of the archivist. And they require familiarity not just with how papers look, but also with what they contain.

Over the next several months I would become familiar with the papers in all of Booth's offices. I would come to recognize his handwriting, his editorial shorthand and foibles, all the minute details that characterize his personal touch. Booth's papers are full of the cloudy palimpsest of erasure marks in the margins, whited-out clauses on typewritten manuscripts, struck through words on thin and translucent carbon copies, the repeated x of typewriter keys that have hammered a misplaced word into blackness. As archivist, however, my work was not that of the scholar who pores through these Prufrockian decisions and revisions searching for meaning in the larger context of an oeuvre. It was my task to get to know Booth's work (that is, its ideas and arguments) only inasmuch as necessary to facilitate the best organization of its material manifestation in all these papers.

Inevitably, though, even this utilitarian acquaintance with Booth's papers instilled in me a strong impression that I also knew the man who had entrusted them to me. Of course, this was an illusion. I could read every letter, doodle, and word he ever recorded and this familiarity would be only second-order, presumptive, no matter how revealing and honest such artifacts might be. To use his own terminology, through these texts I would know only the implied Booth, not the flesh-and-blood man responsible for their creation. To conflate these two would be to deny my own place—as a reader, as an archivist, as an individual with dispositions all my own—in the fundamentally rhetorical process immanent in any inquiry with knowledge as its aim. Try though I did, I could not erase myself from my construction of Booth, neither from the collection of artifacts I would organize into his archive, nor from the man I imagined such artifacts implied him to be. But all this is just the beginning. Things get especially interesting when it becomes clear that I could not be erased from even Booth's construction of himself. What this means for an understanding of *legacy* will become clear in time. First, we will need to clarify our terms.

What Is an Archive?

A provisional definition: an archive is a collection of evidentiary documents and artifacts, the historical origin of which is attributed to an individual, organization, place, group, or office. A presidential archive, for instance, would contain the correspondence, notes, manuscripts, diaries, calendars, transcripts, and other miscellany of a president either during the term of his office or before or after. In its basic sense, the archive then serves a twofold function: as a site of preservation of historical record, and as a resource for researchers to consult for potential insight into its subject. These remarks may seem remedial, but I have made two challenging claims. First, that the archive is evidence-bearing. Second, that the archive is material. The latter claim is less problematic and a good place to begin. Considering the archive as an object of criticism or theorization necessarily entails confronting its materiality. By materiality, I mean its 3D, tangible bulk: the space an archive physically occupies in a room. You can *touch* archival materials. When libraries or institutions catalog an archive, they do not just list an accession number or citation; they indicate its quantity: 7 cubic feet; 32 manuscript boxes; 2,433 papers. Ways of

measuring its scope vary, but the idea is to give “researchers a general idea of the size of the collection before consulting it” (Morris and Rose 72). When it comes to archives, it helps to know what you are (literally) getting into. Whatever else might be said of the archive, whatever abstraction one cloaks it in, archival materials cannot be denied their material palpability.¹

The significance of an archive’s materiality, of course, is not that it takes up space, but that the documents of which it consists are typically thought to have some historical value. One might question their authenticity, but otherwise the tactility of an archive’s documents and artifacts demands they be acknowledged as historical “fact” in at least an ontic sense. In other words, they are evidence. Now the nature of that evidence—what an archive is evidence *for*—remains a major problem for archive theory because it calls into question the relationship between so-called facts and the stories those facts seem intrinsically to tell. Paul Ricoeur explains the problem nicely, warning against “the illusion of believing that what we call historical fact coincides with what really happened, or with the living memory of eyewitnesses, as if the facts lay sleeping in the documents until the historians extracted them” (178). The archive’s evidentiary status requires what Ricoeur calls a “vigilant epistemology” that stops the conflation of archival fact with the stories they might tell. Here, the age-old relationship between history and fact might help by way of clarification. E. H. Carr offers a useful synopsis of the kinship between history and fact in the first chapter of his book, *What is History?* After taking the reader through a sweeping account of how various historians have explained the relationship in different ways, he concludes with the following, simplified suggestion: History is “a continuous process of interaction between a historian and his facts, an *unending dialogue* between the present and the past” (emphasis added 35). The unending nature of history implies that no irrefutable, single “history” will ever be taken as a conclusive final word. In this model, history is more than mere facts; it is also the way those facts are assembled and contextualized into a narrative capable of delivering meaning. The dialogue Carr mentions thus intimates that “a historian and his facts” invent history only by being in conversation with one another. Neither facts alone, nor solely a historian’s accounting, suffice to generate historical truth.

Given how quickly the archive pulls us into such major concerns as historical truth, it is no wonder that some of our major thinkers have theorized the archive as an important site. Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida, for instance, have attempted to refute the archive’s long association with positivism and what Helen Freshwater calls “the myth of the fixed historical record” (734). The general trend in this work has been to problematize the power implicit in the archive’s claim to curate and protect what the *archon* (i.e., the state or ruling institution that protects the archive) regards as important. For Foucault, this power manifests in an “archaeology of knowledge” with biopolitical control at its base. For Benjamin, insofar as his incomplete Arcades Project can be seen in light of his earlier work, the archive’s power must lie partly in the non-reproducible “aura” of the original artifacts it maintains. And for Derrida, the archive establishes the state’s power and authority,

sending those who encounter it into a fever of desire to recover a subject that is always both present and absent in the archive's materiality.

Though only glossed here, such major theorizing has certainly contributed to what Charles E. Morris III notes is an "archival turn in rhetorical studies" today—one that finds scholars increasingly casting a critical-rhetorical lens upon archives as "chief among the inventional sites of rhetorical pasts" (113). It is accordingly now the status quo to theorize the archive as a rhetorical construction: as incomplete, incapable of fixing in place for a researcher's recovery the past it exists to preserve. For Barbara A. Biesecker, this rhetorical construction is twofold in nature: a doubled-invention that emphasizes the archive's "irreducible undecidability" (130). Rather than treat the archive as a "site of singular discovery," she claims it is always the scene "of our collective invention of us and of it" (124). Carolyn Steedman likewise describes the archive as fragmented, inevitably riddled with "its exclusions, its emptinesses" (68), so that the researcher cannot help but approach it selectively, constructing and filling in the archive's conspicuous gaps. In these theories, the archive enacts multiple rhetorics. Neal Lerner describes the polyphony of these multiple rhetorics as part of the "social process" in archival research:

The social forces that shape archival research are many, from a researcher's experiences and expectations, to contemporary events, to the choices made by those who have donated papers to an archive, leading to fragments of information that even the best archive will offer. In other words, archival research is not merely about the artifacts to be found but is ultimately about the people who have played a role in creating and using those artifacts, whether their authors, their subjects, their collectors, their donators, their readers, or a host of other players in the social worlds represented. (195–96)

Biesecker, Steedman, Lerner, and others share a thoroughly postmodern, nearly post-historical view, bearing the marks of Jean-Fançois Lyotard's incredulity about any "grand narrative" that, in this case, an archive might contribute toward creating.

As theorized today, an archive's historicity thus exists alongside its rhetoricity. The archive marks a performative space for the construction of its meaning. The participants in this performance are familiarly consubstantial. There is the archive itself (i.e., its material artifacts); there is the archivist who assembled the archive in a particular way; there is the *archon* whose authority makes possible an archive's particular existence and safekeeping; there is the veridical truth of the subject matter the archive supposedly maintains evidence of or about; and, finally, there is the researcher who confronts the archive, usually not without first passing through a series of gatekeepers who ensure its protection. All these players look for, point toward, and attempt to recover and reclaim a subject/past that is always deferred. Any archive is, a priori, compiled through the curatorial choices of an archivist who deliberately chose some artifacts for inclusion, unintentionally preserved others, and conspicuously excluded still more. According to the current theory, archives are incomplete, and hence rhetorically brought into being inasmuch as the curated nature of their holdings would tell a different story, record a different group of evidence, if they had been selected or organized differently. Meanwhile, the

evidentiary artifacts that this rhetorical archive maintains serve to activate in the researcher a feverish hope of accessing a historically amberized subject/past that, in fact, is only capable of being partially reanimated, recreated, or reinvented by the researcher's own interests, dispositions, biases, and rhetorical means for filling in the archive's inevitable silences and gaps. According to these theories, the resultant doubled-invention of and by archive and researcher results in a shifting sense of truth. The archive discloses different meanings for each researcher, and each researcher recreates different meanings of it with each subsequent encounter.

But *all* this theorizing about the archive succeeds because of a temporal premise no one has explicitly problematized. Namely, that the archive concerns the past. It may not be an ossified past; there may be myriad stories to tell about it, and as many ways plausibly to interpret its truth; but the sense remains: the archive preserves a material record of a past through artifacts linked historically to an earlier time and place. It is this "pastness" that leads the archive into its central paradox. On one hand, to take away the archive's historical records, to remove its role as the repository of such artifacts, is to strip the archive of its *sine qua non*. It is not an archive unless this material pastness remains protected and in place. On the other hand, and curiously, once we grant the assumption that the archive preserves and records artifacts from the past, we invite theorists then to proceed with interpreting it not using the archaeologist's toothbrush, but using a deconstructionist's crowbar. Said differently, because of the archive's pastness, regnant archive theory obliterates the possibility of the past an archive offers ever being stable or complete. To read such theory is to come away less with a fever than a headache.

There would appear to be no way out. Either we theorize an archive that does not bother to retain historical artifacts that document a past—in which case, we destroy any meaningful sense of the archive. Or we accept the archive's pastness but proclaim it incomplete, "rhetorical," forever inadequate and out of reach from the past it hopes to preserve—in which case, we mark the archive as a failure, as unsuccessful at what it is there to do in the first place. Faced with these unappealing alternatives, we may need a wholesale revision of what we take the archive to be, as in the former problem, or what we take it to do, as in the latter. Returning to the story of Booth's archive may take us a measure closer toward a rapprochement.

The Archive and Autobiography

In 2001, at the time of my involvement in organizing his papers, Booth was a distinguished professor emeritus—over 80 but still rounding regularly through campus on a bicycle with raised handlebars—and the work on which his legacy would rest had already been written, published, translated, and reprinted. He was famous—inasmuch as American academics can be—for his work as a rhetorician and pluralist of vast interests and inquiries. Having written some late-career books fueled by the sheer momentum of his unstoppable curiosity, he had lately begun developing plans for his autobiography. The papers it was my task to organize constituted the primary source material for his project.

An autobiography is a written narrative account of one's own life, organized in a way meant best to convey one's own version of "truth" about his or her time alive. Biography, of course, does the same narrative accounting about the life of someone else. It would seem more common, then, for a biographer to consult her subject's archive than it would for an autobiographer, who can consult her memory, and whose perspective on the subject of herself is never as accessible to anyone else. But given memory's fallibility, autobiographers often consult the artifacts from their pasts to spur the mind toward self-reflection that no amount of gorging on Proustian madeleines will suffice involuntarily to recall. This, anyway, appeared to be the case with Booth, who used his papers to (re)collect biographical artifacts that, with self-reflection, he could then assemble into a personal story.

Such an enterprise underscores how the archive, as the site of these artifacts, interacts with the researcher to construct a narrative history or "truth" about its subject. In Booth's case, the researcher and the subject were the same. But even in the biographical enterprise, the archive's rhetoricity remains. Christine Wiesenath addresses this process in her work on "Ethics and the Biographical Artifact," and in doing so illustrates the paradox at hand. Wiesenath distinguishes between fact—"a thing done"—and artifact—"a thing made," noting the latter's relation to something "artificial" (63). An artifact, she says, is useful "in relation to the epistemological ambiguity that all nonfiction writing trades in, as the forging of some form of experience into literary truth, or even fact-based prose" (64). The "forging" she suggests implies the relationship between fact and story will always be one of mutual compromise. The biographer cannot help but mediate between the evidence and the story to which that evidence points. As she cleverly notes: "the biographical subject, or 'I,' too, is fortified on the one hand by 'art' and on the other by 'fact,' just like the letter 'i' literally encased in the middle of the word 'art-i-fact'" (64). The true story a biography aspires (and often purports) to be is like an artifact: mediated by an individual's rhetorical influence. Reconciling the "factual" evidence of a life with the story inspired by that evidence is precisely the rhetorical task of the biographer, and no less of an autobiographer like Booth.

In practice, it is no easy task. Kathleen Wider notes that the biographer consulting a personal archive faces a multiplicity of deceptions when trying to create a story from evidentiary facts. She describes realizing, while working with the archive of her paternal grandmother, that "she was a spectator of her life, although not an objective, disinterested, or even innocent one. My narration of her life would be as biased and subjective as her own narration in her scrapbook and letters" (71). The point being that everyone brings biases to their interactions with archives, no matter their subjects. Indeed, the more pertinent point is that archival materials *are themselves biased*. By consulting his papers to aid in the writing of his autobiography, Booth had to navigate through the bias of the Booth who authored the papers to begin with, as well as the older Booth who was revisiting them for a particular reason. He also had to contend with me.

I am not sure how much, if any, of his manuscript he had written by the time I was organizing the papers that would become his archive. Although I do not recall him

ever asking me to drum up, say, a diary entry or letter that I had found and filed away in my work for him, he did have those three offices where his papers were kept, and I know in the course of my months on the job he worked in one while I “archived” in another. Eventually, we rotated through the three sites, making it likely that to write his autobiography he consulted evidentiary artifacts from his past at times before, after, and conceivably *during* my collection and construction of his archive as a particularly organized body of documents. While he and I had no substantial dialogue about his book, then, we silently engaged in a rhetorical dialogue as the way I organized his papers depended on access only to those he was not consulting, and the way he presumably came to consult the ones I organized depended on how I had organized them. This sort of invisible dance, a rhetorical performance, may well have had some bearing on the development of his autobiography, in which case, he was not the sole performer of his own personal narrative. For Booth, though, these dances were unavoidable. The heteroglossia of lived experience, certainly of written texts, meant these masquerades were happening everywhere all the time. His efforts with graduate assistants to create penciled annotations as a preliminary organization system for his papers attest that I was not the first involved in shaping his papers for his autobiography. Nor was I the last.

In the final months of his life, Booth worked closely with his family, editors, and others to bring his autobiography into the published form it bears today. Adam Kissel, a professional editor of faculty manuscripts, was at the Booth residence nearly daily during this time, consulting Booth about the book that would tell his life’s story. Meanwhile, Alison Booth, Wayne’s daughter, and Phyllis Booth, his wife—both successful scholars in their own rights—spent countless hours at the dining room table, sorting through mounds of “Dad’s” files and family photographs, trying to choose the book’s illustrations. This sort of collaborative process was not unusual for Booth, though it certainly can seem so in the context of an autobiography that purports to be one’s *own* telling of one’s story. In nearly all his writing, Booth took enormous efforts to improve his work-in-progress by soliciting and contending with a range of different readers and perspectives. Once in the final stages of most projects, he followed an editorial process of lying in bed at night with his wife, reading his manuscripts aloud. Only when heard aloud, he thought, could the irregularity and awkwardness of a sentence’s cadence best be discerned. So they would lie in bed, taking turns at reading the manuscripts to one another, and he would stop to make a note when one of them noticed a passage sounded particularly cumbersome or came too clumsily off the tongue.

As his work and the process of its creation attest, Booth seems to have been comfortable relinquishing the myth of a solitary, monologic model of expression in favor of these dialogic and collaborative rhetorical exchanges. But more than that, these exchanges were what he lived for. Given his entrenched belief that a one-to-one correspondence between a reader and implied author is often illusory, which is related directly to his strong sense that we all have various personae and poses we perform both internally and socially in the course of our lives and interactions, it is no wonder that his autobiography, *My Many Selves: A Quest for a Plausible Harmony*

(*MMS*), tells the story of an ongoing attempt to inquire into the nature of these personal and shared rhetorical interactions—and to resolve them in a plausible harmony.

His Many Selves: Booth's Autobiography

Only a few examples will suffice to demonstrate how Booth enacts these shared interactions in his book. *MMS*'s abiding thematic device is to pit Booth's conflicting selves against one another in an effort to illustrate their simultaneity within a single man. Hence what he calls the book's "anthology format" whereby the chapters are organized by common confrontations between his various selves. Chapter 1: "A Devout Mormon is Challenged by Rival Selves." Chapter 4: "My Many Selves Confront the Man Who Believes in LOVE." And his multiple selves number in the dozens: Cheater WB, Honest WB, Moral WB, Vain WB, Luster WB, Loyal Husband WB, and so forth. Artfully, Booth evades the limitation of a strict dogma by embracing the heteroglossic multiplicity of potentialities for his own selfhood. This personal multiplicity of meanings, of interpretations, of scenes of invention, mirrors that of the archive. The rhetorical self Booth envisions, like the archive, is a scene of invention, a dialogue. Accordingly, he invites the reader to question her own many selves as much as he examines his. Autobiography, conceived in this way, is not just one's internal inquiry into selfhood made visible for others; rather, it is a social exchange, a conversation about what selfhood means, so readers confronting Booth's inquiry into his selves likewise inquire into their own. In his introduction, he lays it out for his readers like this: "I hope to engage you into thinking hard about how my conflicts of 'Selves,' of 'Personae,' of 'Voices'—my 'Splits' both deep and shallow—create another kind of drama: the quest for a harmony, or chorus, among those splits" (*MMS* xi–xii). And then the clincher: "As you can see, then, you and I will face the tricky problem not just of who 'I' am, behind the many Selves, but of who you are, as reader here" (xii).

Robert Denham observes that throughout his long career Booth has been "attentive to the many selves contained in each of us—the masks we wear, the poses we assume, the concealments and projections we engage in either deliberately or unconsciously" (21). The obvious example of Booth's work with this theme is *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which distinguishes famously between the "selves" of the flesh-and-blood author, the implied author, and the narrator of a story in fictional prose. But the theme shows up elsewhere too. In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Booth looks more philosophically and religiously at conceptions of the self, and devotes a chapter to "The Self as a Field of Selves," in which he resists the "grand myths of the self" (127) propagated by the modern age's scientists and irrationalists who viewed people as autonomous selves isolated in mind and body. Instead, Booth posits a rhetorical self, unrestrained by social constructs and free to be in dialogue with one's competing selves. In *Critical Understanding* he furthers the case that critical understanding can only happen when we abandon a monistic sense of self in favor of pluralism, and in *The Company We Keep* he takes arms against "the notion of

the self as individual and essentially private” (239). Nearly all his work, in other words, touches on the concept of self. In many ways, then, *My Many Selves* makes an apposite synthesis of his life and his life’s work.

And it is an ambitious project, made successful through his stylistic graces and deep-probing honesty. Booth quotes from almost uncomfortably frank diary entries; revealing, for instance, early masturbation fantasies and later problems with impotence. While the prototypical autobiography, as epitomized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, represents what Denham calls “the romantic and postromantic suppression of all competing internal voices in an effort to discover the true individual—the one natural, inner self” (27), Booth’s approach is decidedly to *express* his competing internal voices. The nature of that tension is what creates his dynamic sense of who he is—and the way he invites his readers to imagine how their own self-conceptions might be formed.

To illustrate, an excerpt from a diary entry he cites dated July 27, 1937, when Booth was 16:

I purchased, in mother’s absence, a licentious, suggestive, sensual book of stories, with pictures. I don’t know why I was so dumb, but I read it, got in more of a sexual condition of passion as I progressed until finally, unable to resist, I, by violent physical agitation, produced the flow of the fluid (I still don’t know whether I should write this or not. I wish that I had a more adequate brain to be able to know what to do). (*MMS* 140)

Having a more adequate brain is not the problem. That the 16-year-old Booth thought so serves as a good example of the competition, or dialogue, occurring privately in him between his multiple selves. Presumably an adequate brain, to Booth at the time, would have suppressed his competing internal voices and seen himself with a unified identity. But he never could, and the older Booth has no desire to try. Narrating from a vantage of over six decades later, he tells us with good comic timing: “the masturbation inevitably continued” (*MMS* 141). As readers we are embedded within a double-layer of dialogue, behind the curtain and from the wings: first between two competing selves in Booth at 16 (Puritan and Luster), but also between the young Booth(s) documented in the journals and the older Booth who remarks about them. These dialogues necessarily engage us as agents in the conversation. The narrating Booth asks of his younger self, “How could he ever have thought that God, who ordered us all to keep honest journals, wanted a record of *that*?” (141). Referring to his earlier self in the third person rhetorically enacts this notion of multiple selves in case it was not already evident. We are implicated in the interchange insofar as he leaves the reader to identify the numerous different selves at play, and to construct their constantly emerging relationship.

Some other devices serve similar ends. Formally, a couple of features have distinguished Booth’s writing more-or-less consistently throughout his body of work, and they are no less on display in his autobiography. Indeed, he uses them to brilliant rhetorical ends here, as if they could not have been suited for a better purpose. First, there are the wonderful epigraphs: often containing five or more quotations at the start of each new chapter, coming from sources high and low, ancient and new,

obscure and universal. He does this in almost all his books—it is his trademark of sorts—and the autobiography is no exception. But unlike most writers, who use one or two quotes for an epigraph, Booth's use of several implicates his readers in piecing together not initially obvious connections among them. The purpose is to perform a dialogue, now not just between his text and the reader, or between an implied older narrator and an implied younger one, but also with all the implied authors of an epigraph's various quotations, which Booth leaves the reader to connect in a plausible harmony of multiple voices, tones, and ideas.

Another feature of his work, used to similar ends in *MMS*, is his mastery of the footnote. Far from mere subsidiary remarks, footnotes elaborate and deepen texts. Their caveats, references, entreaties, and asides serve to loosen the text-proper's fixity of meaning. Here, they enact *another* dialogue within the autobiography's many voices. An example: Booth quotes a diary entry of his from 1941; the young Booth is recalling a talk he gave "on honesty, of all things." His diary records: "I didn't pull punches but gave them what I thought (within minor limits of maintaining silence on some things)—consequently I had no difficulty expressing myself." Then the footnote from an older, wiser Booth, commenting on the younger: "Note the parentheses: he is being *slightly* dishonest as he preaches on honesty. Obviously it has not yet occurred to the 19-year-old that all successful teachers do some posing; to succeed they must exercise some skill in performance" (120). Again, then, this refers to an earlier Booth in the third person, but this time explicitly to begin a conversation about posing.

For Booth, positing a multiplicity of selves consubstantial in any one flesh-and-blood person means also recognizing the near constant posing that it entails. Such posing amounts to a performance of those selves in their situationally specific emergence. A byproduct of a philosophy of multiple-selves and the uncenteredness it implies is that we often need to pose as something we are not—or as only a limited variation of what we fully are. As Denham argues, the ostensible dishonesty of these performances appears to have troubled Booth throughout a lifetime engaged in ethical thought. Denham says that Booth's notion of "hypocrisy upwards" serves to reconcile the performative nature of our social interactions with a pluralism of character that is always rhetorical. Certainly, we see Booth attempting this reconciliation in his autobiography. The point, though, is that such performances are fixed in the very fabric of our humanness; they emerge variously in a multitude of situationally specific rhetorical occasions. This should sound similar to what I have argued is the archive's dialectic between fixedness and dynamism. Rethinking the archive as performance both finally and ephemerally offers one way to resolve the dialectic.

The Archive, Performance, and Legacy

For performance scholars, most attempts to deal with the archive have focused, understandably, on performance archives: those archives that keep audio and visual recordings, alongside other documentation (programs, costumes, props, etc.), from

theatrical or musical performances. The aim of such archives is more-or-less the same as all archives—they aim to preserve. In this case, the performance archive attempts to preserve performances that are, by their very nature, corporeal and ephemeral. But here is the problem. Any understanding of performance that regards corporeality and temporality (i.e., a performance’s “live and in person” nature) as essential to distinguishing something *as performance*—as opposed, say, to something merely textual—thus creates problems for extant notions of the archive. Archives may be material, but they are never corporeal. Researchers may enter the archive to reanimate the past through its evidence thereof, but such attempts are only reproductions; they inevitably fail to capture performance in its time-contingent liveness. As Freshwater says, “all archivisation of live performance is problematised by its subject’s time-based nature. No amount of video, documentary recording, or personal testimony can capture the ephemerality of performance. Something will always be lost in translation.” As a result, she calls for a redefining of the archive in a way that accommodates “the singularity of performance as a medium” (754). I have been suggesting that the example of Wayne Booth makes a useful way to think about that redefining and, particularly, its implications for an understanding of *legacy*.

In part, though, it is the idea of legacy that helps us rethink the archive. What do I mean by legacy? I am referring to the material and immaterial remainder of someone’s life and work after one’s death: to that which we remember about some once-living person, from his or her interpersonal actions to the ideas that person propounded professionally or privately. But legacy is more than just memory. In short, I regard one’s legacy as the entire inheritance of influential ways of being, thinking, and communicating that survive to guide or misguide one’s successors. Inasmuch as the personal archive stores artifactual evidence of someone’s time alive, and our encounter with it is, as we have seen, rhetorical in both directions, the archive plays a terrifically important part in creating one’s legacy—and recreating it again and again.

Understood accordingly, the archive does not just hold documents fixed in time, or for that matter just house documents unlocked by researchers in a rhetorical process of mutual reinvention. Something has happened to our dialectic. When theorized through the lens of *legacy*, as that which survives from the past, the archive’s pastness is no more than superficial; mere historicity. A legacy is, by definition, ongoing. It cannot be anchored in the past. It cannot be historical. But this is more than a cute “what’s past is prologue” solution, or some kind of metaphysics of memory as living thing.² The archive may not be corporeal, and its documents—even high-definition audio/video recordings—may not capture Benjamin’s “aura” in original art or live performance, but our encounter with the archive is always embodied in time. It is always “live and in person” as we pore through dust-covered papers in some dim and climate-controlled room. The archive, in other words, is a stage for performance, and one cannot confront the archive without also performing.

But it is not just the researcher who performs in her encounter with the archive. In the case of a personal archive, as we would certainly call Booth’s, there is also a performance locked in the artifacts that the archive contains. This is the performance

of its subject's personal narrative. Such a performance is marked by the absence of Booth (or any archival subject) as an embodied performer. Instead, he speaks through a disembodied voice with an embodied researcher invested in staying voiceless. As Kristin Langellier has argued, scholarship's whole "performative turn" was initially inspired by "the twin conditions of bodiless voices, for example, in ethnographic writing; and voiceless bodies who desire to resist the colonizing powers of discourse" (126). Now that performance scholarship is an entrenched field of inquiry, we would do well to recognize the archive as another site where bodiless voices and voiceless bodies interact in the rhetorical performance of a personal narrative that resists being locked into one historical Truth, but instead gets dynamically reanimated in the legacy born from the rhetorical dialogue among archive, subject, and researcher. It is not enough then to say encounters with the archive are rhetorical processes. Of course they are rhetorical. They are rhetorical in the way a performance is rhetorical: by virtue of *kairos*, the "presentness" of a passing instant that finds a body in time, facing down an opportune exigency that, like a *legacy*, is neither past nor future but suspended by both.

My story as Booth's archivist is particularly useful because, during my work with his papers, the emerging archive I organized into existence did not concern a dead subject at all. Far from it. The papers suffused me with the illusion that I knew the flesh-and-blood man, but his living presence in flesh-and-blood made it impossible for me ever to let that illusion deceive me completely. These papers could not capture the whiteness of his beard, the way he steeped his tea, the grip of his handshake. As a result, his papers did not carry the "pastness" that most archives do. They maintained the "presentness" of being, at any moment, capable of revision by the person from whom they had come. Indeed, Booth consulted his papers while writing his autobiography, and in doing so he revised them, or rather, engaged them in a dialogue that would cast his legacy along the trajectory he intended. He knew that once the papers became his "archive" and were left in his absence to speak for themselves, the dialogue would be engaged by someone else. Far from a tragedy, though, he relished the idea of an ongoing dialogue in which, however faintly, echoes of his voice would remain. As someone who saw his life as a performance of multiple selves—each one emergent in a particular *kairotic* moment—he would have been sympathetic to theories of the archive that regard it as a performative site. In this sense, the archive does not merely contain or preserve artifacts from the past; at least, that is not its meaningful purpose. Rather, it is by preserving these artifacts that a personal archive makes possible re-staged performances of the performances that the artifacts were to begin with. This time, there may be different players, animating the performance afresh to reveal new meanings and interpretations, as a play staged under new direction and in another context can be imbued with an entirely distinct sensibility than the one in which it was written. As Booth's autobiography indicates, that is how a "plausible harmony" among multiplicities is achieved: not by choosing one among myriad alternatives and fixing it as the monosemous identity or narrative we might call "knowledge" about a person or subject, but by engaging an ongoing dialogue in a performance that is always embodied in *kairos*, in *legacy*.

While the story of Booth's archive and autobiography is certainly singular, I do not believe it is so anomalous as to preclude our drawing broader insights from it. Just the opposite. My unique position as archivist for Booth while he was still alive and preparing an autobiography—that quintessential document in which one attempts to cast one's legacy—has led me to think about archives, performance, and legacy in ways that bear meaningfully on archive theory in general. I relate strongly to theories that attend to an archive's implicit power and its rhetorical doubled-invention, but I have also tried to push them further. What matters may not be that we invent the archive and the archive invents us, nor that power relations and a host of biases are inevitable in the archive and its encounters. Instead, from rethinking the archive as I have aimed to do, we might hope to gain a more optimistic appreciation of archives as historically fixed, but fixed precisely in their dynamic multiplicity. As attested by its documents, the archive offers a place for the dialogic performance of a plausible harmony that only a performance can achieve.

Notes

- [1] Digital collections, of course, make a possible exception to an archive's conventional materiality. Such collections are increasingly prevalent because many texts now begin and only ever remain digital. Further thinking is necessary to determine if digital collections are fundamentally non-material, or if they merely call for a broadened concept of materiality. In either case, access to an archive requires one's embodied interaction with artifacts valuable as *archival artifacts* only insofar as their substance remains materially unaltered.
- [2] Matthew Reason offers a compelling account of live performance archives and their relationship with memory, well worth reading, but beyond my scope here.

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