



PROJECT MUSE®

My Many Selves

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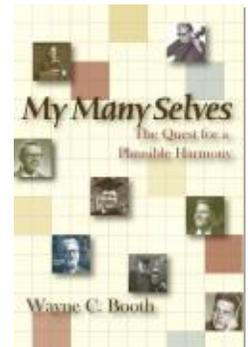
Published by Utah State University Press

Booth, C..

My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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Interlude

A Potpourri of Chapters I Refuse to Write (Let Alone Include)

MY MOST FAMOUS HOAX: ONE THAT WOULD-BE-WITTY WAYNE
THOUGHT CLEVER AND THAT ONLY *SOME* OF HIS FRIENDS LAUGHED AT

Decades Ago

My colleague James Chandler has been working for some time on a book to be called *England in 1819*. He and I have been discussing hoaxes of various kinds, so I decide to test him. After obtaining some stationery from a friend at Stony Brook, I write a subtly fake letter and have the friend mail it from New York.

Dear Professor Chandler:

Since I am soon to publish a book entitled *England in 1818–1820*, I have been shocked to learn of your project on the year 1819. My lawyers have advised me that the best route for me is to sue, if you persist in your project.

And so on, for a full page, with several subtle clues that the letter could not be genuine. It names a few alternatives to legal battle. I sign it “Asst. Prof. Harley Simpson” and wait for Jim’s response.

For some weeks, whenever we meet, he gives no hint of having seen the letter. Then one day at my office the secretary says, “Someone called saying that your keynote address, scheduled for Mandel Hall at three today, has been shifted to Brendel Hall. If you have any questions, you can call him at 2-7856.” In absolute panic—I have totally forgotten about the lecture—GullibleB calls the number. The answerer has a strong French accent. It takes me quite a while to figure out that it is Jim.

He later confesses that he had taken my hoax seriously for several minutes, actually discussing it with colleagues who, in all seriousness, advised

him to sue back. Only when he thought, shortly after, about that signature, “Simperson,” did he catch on.

Both his and my hoaxing, I would now argue, especially after hearing him tell an audience about it last week, built a friendship considerably closer than ever would have occurred if we hadn’t hoaxed.

25,729 JOKES I’VE HEARD AND RETOLD AND SOMETIMES RESISTED
RETELLING

(All deleted, because you’ve already heard them all.)

INNUMERABLE PORNOGRAPHIC STORIES THAT TURNED LUSTERB ON
AND SHOCKED PURITANB

502 ANGRY LETTERS, FACE-TO-FACE ATTACKS, AND REJECTION SLIPS
THAT VAINB RECEIVED FROM STUDENTS, TEACHERS, READERS,
RELATIVES, AND EDITORS: COMPLAINTS ABOUT SOME OFFENSE OR
STUPIDITY, IMAGINED OR REAL (One Only)

Letter from Cambridge University Press (from memory)

There are some admirable moments in this MS [*The Rhetoric of Fiction*] but we feel it will find very few readers, partly because they will be put off by the word “rhetoric.”

THE BUNGLER, LOUT, OAF, CLOD, YOKEL, HICK, COMMITS 748
STUPIDITIES-GOOPS-GAFFS-BOOBOOS-BLUNDERS-BONERS-BLOOMERS-
HOWLERS-BOTCHES-FAUX PASES (Such as That Misspelling) AND
PREMATURE SENIOR MOMENTS (One Only)

Long-Distance Phone Call to University of Nebraska (from memory)

WB: I hate to bother you, Sam, but I’m a bit puzzled about not having received from you yet a full schedule of our conference. This is the first time

I can remember when a chairman has failed to post a conference schedule this late—only two weeks before we start.

Sam: Well, Wayne, I understand your anxiety, but have you forgotten that the conference is not for April 10 *this* year but for April 10 *a year from now*?

MULTIPLE COPIES OF MORE THAN FIFTY “CHRISTMAS LETTERS” SENT TO “EVERYBODY,” ATTEMPTING TO AVOID THE BOREDOM THAT SUCH LETTERS TOO OFTEN YIELD (Two Only)

Example #1

To all Beloveds, The Shortest Christmas Letter in History
“End of muddy crushmess.” . . . Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Example #2

Anti-Christmas (Delayed Chanukah?) Letter, Dec. 25, 1998

Dearly Beloved, Intimate, Never-Neglected Friends:

The major event of this entire year has been my struggle over whether to write a Christmas/Chanukah letter. [Then, two single-spaced pages describing the internal debate.]

375,423 DUTIES THAT THE LOYAL HUSBAND PERFORMED WHEN REQUESTED BY PHYLLIS (Two Only)

Example #1, occurring right at this moment as I write, a pleasant one:
“Could you please rub some of this lotion on my back?”

Example #2: “Please, please, always shut the closet door after you’ve put your coat in it.”

THE ONLY THREE ORDERS THAT THE LOYAL HUSBAND EVER REFUSED TO OBEY (One Only—the Others Are Too Embarrassing)

I have dressed up for a dinner party—actually put on a necktie and jacket for the first time in weeks. Phyllis looks at me, says that it’s the wrong necktie with that jacket and those pants. I’m suddenly angry, shout back at her, and refuse to change—thus going to the party dressed worse than if I had obeyed.

4,011 OCCASIONS WHEN MORALB, NOBLY HONEST AT LEAST THREE TIMES A WEEK, HAS BLURTED OUT “TRUTHS” (SOME LATER DISCOVERED TO BE FALSE) THAT EITHER PHYLLIS OR FRIENDS HAVE CURSED HIM FOR DISCLOSING

How could I give even one example without offending Phyllis or a friend?

FIVE ABANDONED PROJECTS THAT, IF PURSUED, WOULD HAVE TRANSFORMED THE WORLD (One Only)

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences agreed to my proposal for a collection of essays by prominent thinkers on the subject “How We Americans Educate—And *Miseducate*—Our Children, *OUTSIDE* of the Schoolroom.” Many top-rankers responded favorably to my invitation. And then, for reasons I cannot reconstruct, I dropped it. Or can I blame the AAAS?

SEVENTY-SIX UNINTENTIONAL, ARROGANT CRUELITIES AGAINST OTHERS (One Only)

When Phyllis and I are “courting,” back in 1944, she decides to show me some poems she’s written. Other readers have praised them, and she hopes for my favorable opinion. Most of my comments are, instead, critical suggestions for improvement. She sees the suggestions as so negative that—as she remembers it now—the episode permanently killed her impulse to write poetry.

ABOUT 9,000 DREAMS RECORDED IN LIFER’S JOURNAL, EVERY ONE OF WHICH WOULD ILLUSTRATE AT LEAST ONE OF HIS SELF-SPLITS (One Only)

Feb. 21, 1954

I wake from an afternoon nap, having fallen asleep after a somewhat hurried and harried love bout (some students were directly below us, and the bed squeaked quite ’orribly; we were afraid Richard [age 2 ½] would wake any minute; and there was a strong chance that Kathie [age 5+] would come into the room any time, even though we had moved the dresser in front of the door: we must get a key). Phyllis woke first. When I woke I started talking:

Now what on earth could make me dream this dream? I am wielding a blow-torch. The flame dies, indicating that I’m out of fuel. I carefully turn

off the valve, carefully remove the lid, even more carefully remove the lid of the supply can, pour meticulously a new supply into the torch, restore the lid to the supply can, restore the lid to the torch, and then pump up the air pressure and relight the torch. Now what on earth is there about that dream that is in any way significant?

Pause. Phyllis laughs, and then, casually, as she leaves the room, “Except perhaps that you pumped something up that had petered out?”

EIGHT DISASTROUS PERFORMANCES AS AN AMATEUR ACTOR (Two Only)

Second Year in College

As a college sophomore, I am to perform the priest in Yeats’s *The Land of Heart’s Desire*. The director is appalled at my pronunciation of “daughter” as “dodder,” or—at best—dotter, when the priest is to shout about the missing crucifix. I work at it manfully: doughdah, doughtah, dewtah, and finally the boss accepts at dress rehearsal my “rough translation into British.” Then, in the actual performance, the whole cast gets confused several lines before my scheduled command, and to pull things together I point at the blank wall and shout, ignoring all training, “Dodder!”

University of Chicago, about 1955

I have agreed, stupidly, to play Duncan in a campus performance of *Macbeth*. Director, even stupider than I am, insists that character Macbeth must be performed as totally blind from the beginning, yielding impossible problems for everyone, not just Duncan. Rehearsals get worse and worse. At the single performance, within three minutes the audience is laughing at almost every line, including most of mine. Humiliation for all.

UNCOUNTABLE GAMES I’VE LOVED TO PLAY BECAUSE THEY RULED ASIDE ALL SPLITS—EXCEPT WHEN EGO OR AMBITION INTRUDED (Hundreds)

No. 1

“If you’re really clever you can do things backwards. My name is En-yaw Nos-yalc H-toob. What’s yours?”

Maxine, after a half-minute’s thought: “It’s En-ix-am Rol-yat.”

Why have I never played that adolescent game with Phyllis—the lovely Sillyhp?

Nos. 2–2,000

Jacks, rook, *Monopoly*, softball, touch football, backyard basketball, mumblety-peg (boy, was I good at it!), singing songs backwards, singing songs in two-part harmony, parodying songs' texts, making up crazy rhymes, playing Hinky Pinky, chatting in Igpay Atinlay (Pig Latin) or Alfalfa Language (Calfan ouflay tawlfawk alflang lalfangwidge). Inventing private household language (for example, "Aiuto," the Italian for "Help!" which in our family means, "Help! I'm on the toilet and we're out of paper!").

HUNDREDS OF WICKED TEMPTATIONS THAT WERE JUST BARELY DEFEATED BY THE MORALIST

In the Fifties at Earlham College, I learned from a friend that his wife's parents were cheating drastically on their income tax, just keeping hard cash in their safe. I knew that the IRS was paying citizens a fraction of the take for reporting such fraud—the moral thing to do, right? I also knew in my heart that to betray a friend's confidence was absolutely wrong. We were desperate for cash, so after some painful inner casuistry, I decided to turn my friend's parents in to the IRS, secretly.

I sneaked to a public phone, to ensure that my call could not be traced. I dialed the IRS, and as the phone rang, I suddenly slammed down the phone and slunk away, ashamed of myself. I still am—though I still think that all tax cheaters should be caught.

10,537 FANTASTICALLY GENEROUS GESTURES FROM INNUMERABLE FRIENDS AND RELATIVES, NONE OF WHOM HAVE BEEN ADEQUATELY CREDITED HERE (THEY'VE OFTEN RESCUED THIS OR THAT "SELF" FROM GLOOM)

Examples censored. One friend said this week, "If your book doesn't report our fun together, I'll be furious." I couldn't get him to see that to feature him would injure the egos of those unmentioned.

INCREDIBLE, UNCOUNTABLE STACK OF GENEROUS GESTURES OF *MINE* TO FRIENDS AND RELATIVES, DESPITE IMMENSE COST OR HARM TO MYSELF

Just give me a minute or two—I'll surely be able to remember one.