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The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction Wayne C. Booth

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WAYNE C. BOOTH. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. xii; 557 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Neal W. Kramer, professor of English, Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho.

In a time when it has become difficult for scholars whose expertise is increasingly limited by their own specialization to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, a work that both contributes importantly to its own discipline and shares vital human concerns beyond its captive audience is genuinely worthy of celebration. For this reason alone, Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep* marks, for me, a high point in the recent history of literary studies. And, perhaps more importantly, it rejuvenates the once powerful idea that reading stories can indeed influence the development of character, our day-to-day ethical practices. The fundamental purpose of the book is to provide readers with a legitimate means of talking about stories and character without jumping too quickly to dogmatic conclusions that limit our capacity to make complex ethical choices. Since it would be impossible to offer all of Booth's ideas in a short review, I will address what I believe to be three of the more powerful critical tools he provides us for ethical discourse about literature: the languages of pluralism, friendship, and emulation ("hypocrisy upward").

Somewhat surprisingly, pluralism has gotten a bad name in the last twenty years or so. (Like criticism, it has taken on negative connotations and lost, for too many, its genuine meaning.) One of Booth's important lifetime projects has been salvaging the idea of pluralism from attacks from groups he calls in this book "lumpers" and pursuers of "openness." In other contexts, these groups might be called monists and relativists, but both are characterized by Booth as dogmatic. "Lumpers" choose to see the world always from one perspective, believing that their vista is singularly and always absolutely correct. Pursuers of openness accept all values, recognizing the existence of a variety of viewpoints but denying the need for evaluation of ideas and points of view.

In literary criticism, moral lumpers have chosen to take stands against novels, plays, and poems for a variety of different reasons, but the general goal has almost always been the same. They want a work banned or rejected outright on the grounds that it contains some material that may be offensive to a particular group's values or because they perceive its influence to be corrupting. Most of us are aware of this mode of thinking and even have favorite examples

of valuable works that shortsighted, narrow-minded readers have had banned for what they call “moral” reasons.

Perhaps more prevalent among academic literary critics today are the purveyors of openness. This mode of thinking recommends accepting a much broader literary canon than has traditionally been considered. It dogmatically rejects the idea that ethical evaluation has any role in the literary critical enterprise. Booth’s critique of openness (that it rejects any possible dialogue about ethical standards among academic critics and ordinary readers alike) is extremely elucidating in the light of Allan Bloom’s recent critique of openness in *The Closing of the American Mind*. While Bloom rejects the notion that you or I will ever be capable of understanding why certain books should be read or not, Booth presents us with genuine tools for making important distinctions ourselves. Bloom believes that only an elite can read well, but Booth sees us all making educated, ethical decisions while reading and thereby building a better and more democratic society. While Bloom’s work often relies on polemic and rather loosely constructed arguments, Booth presents clear, well-developed arguments and a wide variety of careful ethical readings of many different works to illustrate the viability of his method. In fact, Booth’s demonstrations of pluralist understanding show us how we actually can make ethical evaluations.

The capacity for understanding other people’s views is the centerpiece of Booth’s pluralism. But along with understanding comes the need to ask serious questions of the works we read and to let them ask similar questions of us. Pluralism does not reject truth; instead, it recognizes that in practice truth can only be found among various, often competing ideas. Booth recognizes that this is especially true when we read works of fiction. A major difficulty anyone attempting ethical criticism faces is finding a method appropriate to achieving ethical understanding. As Booth states when talking about standards of evaluation, “The goal is not to pack into our traveling bag only the best that has been thought and said but to find forms of critical talk that will improve the range or depth or precision of our appreciations” (113). It is not only important to know *what* is best but also *why*. The complexity of his model makes it difficult for a reviewer to present all of its details, but the general metaphor Booth develops and explores makes his pluralism quite clear: books as friends.

While talk of books as friends, or of friendship as requiring ethical evaluation, is hardly new, Booth has found a very rich and rewarding merger of these two ideas in his notion that the offers made to their readers by works of fiction are very similar to offers

of friendship made from one person to another. As the phrase “the company we keep” clearly implies, one crucial set of judgments we all make as living, thinking, human beings involves the friends we choose and the lasting rewards good friendships bring to good lives. But what are the criteria we use for determining who our friends are? Are those criteria as dogmatic as some of our rejections of works of fiction? Are they as open as some of our standards for art have become?

Before Booth discusses criteria for friendship, he distinguishes among different kinds of friends. Borrowing Aristotle’s classifications, Booth presents three categories of friendship: useful, pleasant, and self-justifying. As we can readily see, our reading can also fall into these three different categories. We regularly choose to read stories because they seem to us to be useful or pleasurable, but these seldom are stories that we come back to more than once. The most important kind of friendship, the kind that lasts a lifetime and leads to better lives, justifies itself. This is the analogy Booth wants to have inform our ethical studies of fiction.

Self-justifying friendships are those that allow both friends to build better moral character by virtue of their association. If we think of our own best friends, we will likely discover that the reason we like them so much is that we are edified (morally built up) when we are around them. The best works of fiction offer us the chance to become better people by virtue of having associated with the characters they present. As Booth maintains,

Most of the great stories show characters of a moral quality roughly equal to that of the implied reader [the reader the author expects to read the book, a distinction Booth introduced in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*] . . . ; the plots are built out of the characters’ efforts to face moral choices. In tracing those efforts, we readers stretch our own capacities for thinking about how life should be lived, as we join those more elevated judges, the implied authors. We cannot quite consider ourselves *their* equals: they are more skillful than we at providing such exercises in moral discernment. But they imply that we might become their equals in discernment if we only practiced long enough. (187)

If we think for a moment of the characters we have encountered in the finest works we have read—Alyosha Karamazov, Levin, Stephen Dedalus, Huckleberry Finn, Elizabeth Bennet, Pip, Dorothea Brooke, even Flem Snopes—we recognize that their dilemmas are our dilemmas. How they choose to live, as explored by the authors of their stories, allows us to think seriously about how we might make similar choices. Do we choose them as friends, or not? Do our encounters really make us better moral agents?

If we are, in reality, moral agents, it would seem that we would never be compelled to make choices that are bad for us. But experience tells us otherwise. Many offers of friendship end up, as they did for Pinocchio, transforming us into something we never wanted to become. Hence the need for us to make informed choices about what we read, and hence the desire to emulate the best we can find. Booth calls this kind of emulation “hypocrisy upward”: hypocrisy because we are pretending to be something we are not yet, and upward because we hope to become better by acting better.

One of the more distressing discoveries any of us makes can be learning about the real life of an author whose work we genuinely admire. Milton was cruel to his daughters; Shakespeare spent years away from his wife; Moses killed an Egyptian; Faulkner was an alcoholic. Great writers, as imperfect as they often are, aspire to teach us to be better than they were. They are sometimes the worst examples of “do as I say, not as I do.” But the point of talking about hypocrisy upward is not to focus on the real moral weaknesses of actual authors. We are interested, after all, in the effects of reading on the readers themselves. How does this story affect me?

In this section, I believe we find Booth at his critical best. Today, many critics would characterize any talk about emulation as silly and naive. For them, literature is much more than presentation of idealized characters and life-styles for us simply to identify with. And those critics are right to a degree. It is quite foolish for us to identify with soap-opera characters, sports stars, romance heroines, or the sappy characters of many popular novels aimed at the LDS market. “But readers who engage in a story, readers who enter the pattern of hopes, fears, and expectations that every story asks for, will always take on ‘characters’ that are superior, on the scale of a book’s fixed norms, to the relatively complex, erratic, and paradoxical characters that they cannot help being in their daily lives” (255). Even more than this, though, the desire to emulate real friends as well as the friends we find in stories keeps us alive to moral growth and development. “When we lose our capacity to succumb, when we reach a point at which no other character can manage to enter our imaginative or emotional or intellectual territory and *take over*, at least for the time being, then we are dead on our feet” (257). We do not make a few simple choices that fix our characters for the rest of our lives. Character is vital and grows with each successive encounter with, for example, a new neighbor or someone from another country. But it also “changes, grows, and diminishes largely as a result of our imaginative diet” (257). Hence the need for a pluralistic outlook that allows

us to seek character in a variety of areas, *trying* all things and holding fast to the good.

I have not entered into the very sophisticated account of the actual decision-making process Booth's majestic work offers. I leave that to the reader who is willing to invest the hours such a work requires. Let me conclude, however, by saying that the implied author here makes us an offer we can hardly refuse. This Booth is a man whose virtues we do not want to live without, whose sincere concern with our character is laudable in the highest sense. As Booth says to those who have moved him to higher ground, I feel comfortable saying in return:

You lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense, and in a curious way more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere else in the world. You correct my faults, rebuke my insensitivities. You mold me into patterns of longing and fulfillment that make my ordinary dreams seem petty and absurd. You finally show what life can be, not just to a coterie, a saved and saving remnant looking down on the fools, slobs, and knaves, but to *anyone* who is willing to work to earn the title of equal and true friend. (223)