

Reviews

Reading for Life

Wayne C. Booth. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Pp. xii, 534. \$29.95.

Martha C. Nussbaum

Beaten by his stepfather, cut off from the love and care of his mother, David Copperfield turns for companionship to a company of friends whom the gloomy Murdstones have not had the forethought to suppress:

My father had left a small collection of books in a little room upstairs, to which I had access (for it adjoined my own) and which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time—they, and the *Arabian Nights*, and the *Tales of the Genii*,—and did me no harm. . . . This was my only and my constant comfort. When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life. . . . The reader now understands, as well as I do, what I was when I came to that point of my youthful history to which I am now coming again.

In this wonderful passage (which is even more wonderful read in full), David, the mature author of his own life story, reminds his readers of the power of the art of fiction to create a relationship between book and reader and to make the reader, for the duration of that relationship, into a certain sort of friend. Novels are David's closest associates; he remains with them for hours in an intense, intimate, and loving relationship. As he imagines, dreams, and desires in their company, he becomes a certain sort

of person. In fact, the narrator clearly wishes us to see that the influence of David's early reading has been profound in making him the character we come to know, with his fresh childlike wonder before the world of particulars, his generous, mobile, and susceptible heart. And the novel as a whole, in its many self-referential reflections, calls readers to ask themselves, as well, what is happening to them as they read: to notice, for example, that they are sometimes too full of love for certain morally defective characters to be capable of rigorous judgment; that they are perceiving the social world around them with a new freshness of sympathy; in short, that they are taking on increasingly, in the very shape of their desire and wonder, the view of David's father—that "a loving heart is better and stronger than wisdom."

People care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for—both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern. But if this is so, and if the reader is a reflective person who wishes to ask (on behalf of herself and/or her community) what might be good ways to live, then it becomes not only reasonable, but also urgent to ask: What is the character of these literary friendships in which I and others find ourselves? What are they doing to me? To others? To my society? In whose company are we choosing to spend our time?

These questions are obvious enough. We ask them all the time, in many contexts: when we draw up reading lists for our students, when we recommend novels to our friends, when we guide our children's reading. But recent literary theory, on the whole, has either avoided or actively scorned these issues. This resistance has several distinct sources. One is the belief that ethical criticism of literature is bound to be dogmatic and simplistic, measuring the literary work by a rigid normative yardstick which ignores the complexities of the literary form. And, in fact, the suspicion has some justification; a great deal of ethical criticism has been like this. Another source of resistance is the well-entrenched philosophical idea that aesthetic interest is fundamentally distinct from practical interest, an idea according to which ethical assessment of an aesthetic work would be a crude error, betraying the assessor as failing to understand the nature of the practice of aesthetic assessment. A closely related source of resistance is the fashionable recent dogma that literary texts refer only to other texts and not to the world—an idea implying, once again, that it is a naive error to ask how literature speaks to and about us. The old formalism and the new defense of "textuality" are distinct in terminology, but they have many links of motivation and argument. Still a further obstacle to ethical evaluation is the view, also fashionable, that all ethical evaluation is irretrievably subjective. This is sometimes expressed, in the literary world, by saying that all reason-giving is a kind of power-seeking, all argument the expression of "ideology." And finally, we must mention disaffection and

loss of love. Professional writers about literature too often end up losing contact with the love of books, with the fresh delight that led David Copperfield to his friendship with the "glorious host." But once that delight is lost, little remains for evaluation, and it is easy to see why the whole idea loses its allure.

In this fine, rich book, Wayne Booth takes on all of these opponents, including the last, and makes out a compelling case for the coherence and importance of ethical criticism. He does this with a vigor and openness of engagement that remind us of our own experiences of literary absorption and delight. (Booth does not discuss *David Copperfield* or the passage I have quoted, but his entire book could be seen as a commentary on it.) According to Booth's guiding metaphor, a relationship with a literary work (and he explicitly includes his own book here), is a kind of friendship; and a good friendship, he says, is something voluntary. It is, then, a little difficult to know how, in light of this metaphor, we might think about that strange kind of enforced intimacy, the relationship of reviewer to book reviewed. So I wish to begin this review by saying that this book is one that I shall willingly read again and reread—for the range and detail of its arguments, for the vigor of its concrete readings of texts, for the importance of its questions, for its humor and clarity and generous humanity. It is to be recommended warmly to anyone with a concern for the role played by the humanities, and by the interpretation of texts, in our public culture.

I. RELOCATING ETHICAL CRITICISM

Booth tells us that he began his career as a defender, like so many others, of "happy abstract formalism" (p. 5), believing that political and ethical questions, asked of a literary work, were "blatantly non-literary" (p. 5). One day, he and other like-minded humanities teachers at the University of Chicago were discussing the freshman reading list, which had for years included Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Paul Moses, a young black assistant professor, "committed what in that context seemed an outrage: an overt, serious, uncompromising act of ethical criticism" (p. 3). Moses told the other instructors that the book made him angry and he could not teach it again. Its assumptions about the proper relations of liberated slaves towards whites and its distorted portrayals of blacks seemed to him "just bad education." The other instructors (all white) were both embarrassed and offended. This was no way to talk about a great work of art. "I can remember lamenting the shoddy education that had left poor Paul Moses unable to recognize a great classic when he met one" (p. 3). Poor Moses was too angry, clearly, to take up the proper aesthetic attitude.

The Company We Keep, dedicated to the memory of Paul Moses (who died at the age of thirty-seven, only four years after this event) is the

record of Booth's gradual realization that this response to Moses will not do; that Moses was exactly right to ask these questions about literature, right to regard our relations with literary works as important elements in the building of character, right, therefore, to feel that critical ethical discourse about these relationships is not only legitimate, but actually essential to a just and rational society. "To me," Booth concludes, "the most important of all critical tasks is to participate in—and thus to reinforce—a critical culture, a vigorous conversation" (p. 136). This book, then, provides not only a theory of ethical criticism, but many concrete examples, as Booth describes his gradual evolution from the smug and condescending formalist of the Moses anecdote to the passionate defender of the continuity between art and life seen here; and therefore, also, from a somewhat uncritical admirer of "great art" to a person who asks and ponders many difficult questions about the ways in which great literature has portrayed women, minorities, and, in general, our political and social relations.

There have been many forms of ethical criticism of literature, some of them extremely crude and unappealing. Booth therefore spends a good deal of time in Part I of this book (entitled "Relocating Ethical Criticism") distinguishing his own proposal from its relatives. The account is complex, but four distinctions emerge as especially important. First, "ethical," as Booth uses it, is a very broad and inclusive term. It covers everything that pertains to asking and answering the question, "How should one live?" Enjoyment, distraction, even contemplation of form, are all aspects of the ethical as Booth understands it—so long as they are seen as forming part of a human life, and are assessed accordingly. The question he asks of a literary work is nothing so narrow as, "What does it show me about my moral duty?" It is, rather, "What relationship does my engagement with it have to my general aim to live well?"—and to live, we should add, as a member of a society, since Booth insists that human beings are social and political beings.

Second, Booth does not practice ethical criticism by judging particular sentences, or even particular characters, removed from their context in the work as a whole. Practiced in this way, ethical criticism is clearly vulnerable to the charge of neglecting the work's literary structure. Booth's general question is, instead, "What sense of life is expressed in this work as a whole?"—in its design, the shape of its sentences, the interrelationships of its parts. To practice ethical criticism in this way, the critic *must* be sensitive to literary form. And Booth gives us a great deal of help here, introducing a complex framework of useful analytic conceptions that he has also defended in other writings. In particular, he urges readers, as they ask questions about a literary work, to distinguish three voices that are too frequently run together: the *narrator* (the character who tells the story); the *implied author* (the sense of life or the outlook that reveals itself in

the structure of the text taken as a whole); and the *writer* (the real-life person, with all her or his lapses of attention, trivial daily pursuits, and so forth). Although Booth has interesting things to say about the reader's relationship to all of these figures, ethical criticism is concerned, above all, with the relationship between the reader and the implied author. Good ethical criticism, then, does not preclude formal analysis, but actually requires it. Style itself shapes the mind; and these are the effects that a good ethical critic discerns.

Third, ethical criticism, as Booth intends it, does not have a single dogmatic theory of what literature should be or do: for example, that it should reinforce a certain definite moral code, or should put the reader in contact with "otherness." Avoiding what he calls "loaded labels and crude slogans" (p. 7), Booth sensibly insists that there are many good things for literature to do and be—just as many as there are good things in human lives. And he insists on the Aristotelian point that what is good also may be, to some extent, a function of the reader's own particular needs, background, and context. On the other hand, there are also some things *against* which ethical criticism can perfectly reasonably take its stand. We can stand against sadism, racism, sexism; and, also, apart from morality more narrowly construed, we can stand against what Henry James once called "the rule of the cheap and easy"—against, then, sloppiness, vulgarity, and the trivialization of important things.

Fourth, Booth's main concern is not with the *consequences* of reading after the fact. He does consider this an important topic; but the interactions of reading with other elements of life are so complex that relatively little, he thinks, can be said about consequences in a general way. He therefore focuses on a more tractable question: what becomes of readers *as* they read? How do works of various kinds shape their desires and imaginations, fostering, during the time spent reading, a life that is either rich or impoverished, complexly attentive or neglectful, shaped or shapeless, loving or cold—and so forth?

In all these ways Booth's ethical criticism avoids pitfalls that have plagued much of the ethical criticism of the past, and made it easy to dismiss. His subtle analyses of what sentences of certain sorts do to desire and thought convince the reader, again and again, that ethical criticism need not be preachy or formally insensitive. The balance of Part I is spent in a discussion of the logic and argumentative structure of evaluative criticism, and in arguing against skeptical opponents who hold that all evaluation is hopelessly subjective. The two arguments go together, since Booth contends that the skeptic's fall into skepticism can be traced to overly simple assumptions about the form of rational evaluative argument. Identifying all rational argument with deductive argument that proceeds from premises that are necessarily true, the critic finds that no such argument seems to be available in literary evaluation (or, one might add, in ethics

more generally). Seeing this, the skeptic concludes that all argument is expression of feeling, or an attempt to gain power; there is no distinction between persuasion and manipulation. Booth responds by describing, defending, and repeatedly exemplifying a form of non-deductive, yet genuinely rational, argument that he calls "coeduction": a cooperative argument not so much *ad hominem* as *inter homines*, in which principle, concrete experience, and advice from one's friends interact over time to produce and revise judgments. Since this account of practical reasoning is one of the book's most interesting contributions, especially for legal scholars, I shall return to it at greater length.

Part II develops Booth's central metaphor: a literary work is like a friend, and we can assess our literary relationships in much the same way that we assess our friendships, realizing that we are judged by the company we keep. He derives his account of friendship from Aristotle, holding that it is a relationship based on trust and affection, in which we pursue our ends in a social way, sharing, to a large extent, the friend's activities, desires, and values. Evidently, then, the friends we choose are of great significance for the quality of our lives. Aristotle held that there are three different bases or grounds for friendship: pleasure, usefulness, and good character. Booth argues that all three elements, in different combinations, inform our choices of reading. And he argues that it would be difficult to explain why we would choose to spend hours in such intimacy with the mind of an (implied) author unless one or more of these three were the basis. Like Aristotle, he holds that a friendship based upon character and aspiration is the best and richest, though all three types have their place in a good life. This ranking, he argues, is a good starting point for the evaluation of literary experiences, seen as component parts of a life. Especially bad will be experiences in which we are in the company of an implied author with a bad character, forming desires and projects that are sadistic, brutal, unjust, or merely wanton and sloppy. But relationships that offer, let us say, only some useful information or some momentary relief are less valuable than those that enrich our lives in some more substantial way.

Booth next proposes a set of more concrete questions that we may ask of a text as we begin our evaluation of its character and of the relationship it offers us. He tries out these questions on several texts, asking in each case how our desire and thought are shaped as we read. Peter Benchley's *Jaws* is a negative case in point. Booth deftly shows how narrow the range of our sentiments and conceptions becomes as we read it, what a "loss of life is involved in deciding to spend several hours that way."

The story tries to mold me into its limited shape, giving me practice, as it were, in wanting and fearing certain minimal qualities and ignoring all others. I am to become, if I enter that world, *that kind of*

desirer, with precisely the kinds of strengths and weaknesses that the author has built into his structure (p. 204).

Other modern examples—from Norman Mailer, Anne Tyler, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, e.e. cummings—give rise to a variety of more complex analyses. Booth ends the chapter by praising the contributions of an open-ended list of works (by, among others, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Cervantes, Dickens, Tolstoy) on the grounds that these works enable readers “to live during these moments a richer and fuller life than they could manage on their own” (p. 223). Part II concludes with an analysis of the ways in which literary metaphor, in particular, shapes the thought of the reader.

Part III is devoted to extended critical analyses of four writers who have recently been the targets of ethical criticism because of their political or social views. This is an especially fascinating part of the book, since we see plainly Booth’s love of good writing, and the reluctance with which he is persuaded, in some cases, to the negative ethical conclusion. Booth is no rigid ideologue. He comes across as a rather cautious man, but one who cares about social justice and is committed to rational argument. His examples of his own changes of mind thus have much conviction as examples of practical reason in a democratic culture. All four analyses show him changing his judgment over time, as new advice, rereading, and experience combine with general moral principle to generate fresh evaluations.

A long, complex analysis of feminist criticisms of Rabelais ends with victory for the feminists. Booth, however hard he tries on behalf of an author he likes, cannot, once he goes into the matter thoroughly, avoid being convinced that the text as a whole has an offensive view of women. His esteem for Rabelais is consequently diminished.

An analysis of related criticisms of the ending of Jane Austen’s *Emma* comes to a far more complex conclusion. Austen, Booth argues, is clearly not the dupe of a naive myth that women find happiness through the protection of beneficent father figures. She gives evidence throughout her novels of a far more skeptical and critical view of romance, and of women’s possibilities. And yet, in the case of *Emma*, the structure of the ending does seduce us into loving the very outcome she elsewhere criticizes. Booth concludes that the form of the romantic novel imposes its own norms of desire and longing, even in an author as critical and independent as Austen. Undertaking to write in that form, she encounters, so to speak, a tension between its expectations and her own.

An impressive chapter on D. H. Lawrence narrates and justifies Booth’s movement from disdain for Lawrence to enthusiasm. In this case, where the conclusion is somewhat less popular in liberal circles than Booth’s other judgments, I think the reader is particularly likely to feel the force of the process of coeduction at work, as she sees how an argument

of the detailed and patient type Booth envisages (and makes) can actually lead to the revision of a once firmly-held judgment.

Booth ends the book where it began: with the history of his own changes of view concerning *Huckleberry Finn*, presented now as detailed readings and re-readings of the text. Booth has not only come to agree with Moses about ethical assessment in general, he has also come round to Moses' view of the novel, noticing paternalism and condescension where he once saw only the touching portrayal of black nobility. Here we have an especially clear case of the way in which some ongoing moral principles (especially a respect for human equality) guide interpretation, in the light of new experiences and consultations with others. The revised judgment is convincing as one that embodies a more complete human understanding. The reader is likely to be persuaded that it is a rational judgment, and not merely a product of a shift in fashion or the expression of an ideology—in part because Booth carefully gives evidence for his position, but also because one senses that the story of change could not be told in the other direction. Once certain things have been noticed in a text, and connected, as here, to reflective perceptions of actual human societies, one cannot go back, choosing the ignorance that allowed an untroubled enjoyment of the novel.

This is, evidently, a large and a rich book, about which much will be written. None of its central themes can be given full critical examination in a review, even one of this length. But there are three topics on which I would like to say more, and to raise some questions: the boundaries of the literary, the metaphor of friendship, and the analysis of practical reasoning in terms of "coaction" and "pluralism."

II. PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

Booth's subtitle is *An Ethics of Fiction*, and many of his examples, including all the ones in Part III, are novels. But his analysis is actually far more wide-ranging. It includes examples from lyric poetry and also from works of philosophy. (Burke is a central example in one section, Kant in another; the section on metaphor discusses many accounts of the cosmos, both religious and philosophical.) There is, of course, absolutely no reason why Booth's analysis cannot be extended in this way. And yet one regrets that Booth focuses so little on the distinctive qualities of our relationships with *literary* works—never asking at length, for example, how the friendship one can have with a novel differs from the friendship promised by a philosophical treatise; how it differs, as well, from the relationship one is able to form with a lyric poem. The absence of sustained analysis along these lines does not undercut anything that he *does* say. But since Booth has such an enthusiasm for the works he loves, and for novels above all,

one feels a disappointment that he says so little about what kind of "people," as friends, novels are.

One does not want facile generalizing here, clearly. One has to begin with particular cases and work outwards. And yet, if we think of David Copperfield's "reading for life," we become aware that a claim is being made, in Dickens, on behalf of novels more generally: a claim that they offer a distinctive patterning of desire and thought, in virtue of the ways in which they ask readers to care about particulars, and to feel for those particulars a distinctive combination of sympathy and excitement. The gloomy religion of the Murdstones would have none of Peregrine Pickle—and for good reasons, from its own viewpoint.

Dickens is well aware that novels like his cultivate desire and imagination in a way that is morally suspect—not only for the Murdstones but for ethical and philosophical positions of many different kinds, some of them very respectable. Think, for example, of Mr. Gradgrind's school in *Hard Times*, where "fancy" is forbidden. The consistent utilitarian, in Dickens' view, must have a deep mistrust of the literary imagination, since it binds the mind to particulars that lie close to the self, discouraging that impartial concern with all humanity that is the core of utilitarian rationality. (Concerning his daughter, Louisa, Mr. Gradgrind reflects, with satisfaction, "Would have been self-willed, but for her bringing up.")

Novels, then, as a form of writing, have a distinctive, and a controversial ethical content. Even David Copperfield cannot claim that they have made him more consistent and more steady in his judgment. For he clearly connects his early love of stories with his love for his cohort in story-telling, James Steerforth—a character dashing, erotic, and amoral—and with his later unwillingness to judge Steerforth from the moral point of view. He also makes it clear to his readers that Agnes Wickfield, emblem of religious morality, is no novel-reader herself. Dickens's case for the novel, in the light of such challenges, is inseparable from David's claim that the fresh imagination of particularity is an essential moral faculty, and that the tender susceptible heart is morally finer than a firm one.

Such claims, and many others related to them, deserve full scrutiny within the enterprise of ethical criticism. I hope that Booth will at some point write on this subject, saying more about the complex connections between what one wishes to say and the selection of a genre or structure in which to say it.

III. FRIENDSHIP, SEDUCTION, AND A SCHOOL FOR THE MORAL SENTIMENTS

This brings me directly to my second set of questions, about the metaphor of friendship as Booth develops it. It is a marvelously rich and illu-

minating metaphor, but some of its aspects remain, so far, incompletely explored. First, there is an unresolved tension, in Booth's text, between two ways of characterizing these friendships. The main line of Booth's argument speaks of the literary relation as a friendship, and refers to Aristotle for elucidation. But in Aristotle, though friends share one another's ends and are deeply influenced by one another, each retains independence and critical autonomy. Booth, however, describes the reader's relation to a literary work in a different way, invoking the language of seduction. He talks frequently of "succumbing," of "that primary act of *assent* that occurs when we surrender to a story" (pp. 32, 140). This language is important to his argument and cannot be easily removed. For the fact that we surrender trustingly to the forms of desire in the text, allowing it, so to speak, to have its way with us, is crucial to Booth's case for saying that ethical assessment is urgently required. If he allowed the reader more critical distance, he could also, perhaps, allow the reader more vicious and harmful books.

Here, I believe, we see an area in which distinctions among literary genres, and, in particular, a distinction between literature and philosophy, would have been especially fruitful. Philosophical texts, on the whole, do not seduce. Indeed, they repudiate that aim. They ask the reader to be wary and skeptical, examining each move and premise. Mistrust rather than trust is the professional norm, since Socrates, if not earlier.

Texts built along these lines embody a distinctive view of how one ought to treat another human being and conduct a relationship, a view in which erotic love plays little part. Novels, by contrast, are, on the whole, erotic. They invite the reader to assent, to succumb, to be made, for a time, in the image of the text. Reading novels, as David Copperfield well knew, is practice for falling in love.

There is much more to be said here. For most of the great ethical novelists have approached the novel's seductive power as both a resource and a problem. Jane Austen, as Booth describes, skirmishes against the genre's erotic structures with her skeptical good sense, both inviting the reader's trust and warning that all may not be as it seems. Dickens, in our example, wrestles with the problem of combining Agnes's moral judgment with Steerforth's romantic onward movement; and both the "good angel" and the "bad angel" dictate the shape of the text. About Henry James, Tolstoy, Proust—there would be, on this score, fascinating inquiries to be made.

In making such inquiries we might arrive at a new account of the role of ethical criticism. Booth's book does not seduce its readers; it sets out, clearly, to avoid that. It speaks far more like the philosopher than like the novelist, inviting readers to inspect the argument, and to clarify their own relation to it by comparing it with their own experience. This level of reflection and self-examination seems essential to complete the critical cul-

tures Booth describes. The novels by themselves would never have brought him to change his mind about them. It is only by both succumbing and also asking ourselves why we succumbed, and whether we should have, that we respond to literature in the most fully human and social way. So by making a firmer distinction between the philosophical and the literary, and between judgment and seduction, Booth could show more clearly what the contribution of his own project can be expected to be.

To discuss this contribution well will be a complex task. For philosophy, too, has its seductive power, its power to lure the reader away from the richly textured world of particulars to the lofty heights of abstraction. It, too, can promise escape—from the messy and difficult world we live in to a world made more simple and schematic. This sort of seduction can frequently be pernicious in human life. On the other hand, the seductions of literature can frequently return us to a richer and more complex world; and the very enchantments of the novel can lead the reader past her tendencies to deny complexity, to evade the messiness of feeling. Nonetheless, when all this is said, there still seems to be a need for a certain sort of critical philosophy, even to show us the importance and the rightness of literature. But in order to be the ally of literature, philosophy will need to be, itself, less abstract and schematic, more humble in its claims for itself, than philosophy has frequently been. It will have to choose for itself a style that reveals, and does not negate, the insights of literature. To describe such a philosophy and its relationship both to literature and to other sorts of philosophy seems to me to be a very important task. I hope that Booth will undertake it.¹

We now need to discuss one further point about literary friendships. It is an obvious point, so obvious that Booth does not explore it: When one reads a novel one is alone. No other live person is there responding. Therefore there can be no interchange of the sort we associate with love and friendship. This point does not undercut Booth's metaphor as he uses it—but it prompts several ethical reflections that do not come up until one states the obvious.

First, one has to say that books are not sufficient for good human living. They promote absorption and, beyond a point, hinder mutuality. One needs real people too, however correct Booth may be when he says that relations with books are sometimes richer than those with people. On the other hand, the lack of realness in a book also has a salutary side, which is brought out very well, in different ways, by both Henry James and Proust: towards novels it is not possible to feel certain bad emotions of the real personal life, such as jealousy and the desire for revenge. It is, on the other hand, perfectly possible to feel sympathy and love. So in this way

1. I have discussed this issue more fully in "Love's Knowledge," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. B. McLaughlin and A. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 487-514.

novels can be a school for the moral sentiments, distancing us from blinding personal passions and cultivating those that are more conducive to community. Proust goes so far as to say that the relation we have with a literary work is the only human relation characterized by genuine altruism, and also the only one in which, not caught up in the "vertiginous kaleidoscope" of jealousy, the reader can truly know the mind of another person. I would not go that far, but there is a real issue here, and I do not think we can fully understand the ethical contribution of the novel without pursuing it.

There is one last point of a different sort that needs to be borne in mind here. I can treat a book as I would never think it right to treat a real live person. Sometimes people feel the need for complete numbing distraction, distraction so complete that it simply blots out all stress and worry. Consider, now, two people in search of such undemanding release. The one hires a prostitute and indulges in an evening of casual sex. The other buys a Dick Francis novel and lies on the couch all evening reading. There must be, I think, a huge moral difference between these people, a difference that Booth's insistence on the friendship metaphor fails to bring out. (I say this as someone who reads in just this way whenever I finish writing a paper, and I am attempting to defend myself from Booth's harsh assessment.) The person who hires a prostitute is seeking relief by using another human being; he or she engages in a transaction that exploits and debases both a person and an intimate activity. The person who reads Dick Francis is not, I believe, doing any harm to anyone. Surely she is not exploiting the *writer*; indeed, she is treating Francis exactly as he would wish, in a not undignified business transaction. Is she exploiting the implied author by hiring him for her pleasure? I find this a peculiar question; and I think the answer must be, she is doing nothing morally wrong in relieving her stress this way. I think this contrast needs to figure somehow in Booth's account, and it might moderate slightly his harshness towards the uses of popular fiction.

IV. PRACTICAL REASON AND PLURALISM

This brings me to the aspect of the book that will be of most interest to legal scholars: Booth's defense of the objectivity of practical reason in the interpretation and evaluation of texts. Booth explicitly appeals to legal reasoning as a model for his own view (pp. 72-73); and the Aristotelian view of judgment he develops, both in his explicit theoretical account (pp. 70-77) and in his practice, is indeed one that has interesting links with views of legal judgment. Yet there are some obscurities in Booth's position that may limit its usefulness in this sphere.

Booth calls the evaluative judgments he recommends "coductions." (The "co" indicates both that such judgments are made socially, in conversation

with others, and that they have an implicitly comparative element.) In coduction, unlike deductive demonstration, we do not begin from premises that are known, prior, and held absolutely firm throughout. We begin, instead, from our own complex history as beings with principles, with historical memory, with "untraceably complex experiences of other stories and persons" (p. 71). The initial evaluation of a new literary experience is always implicitly comparative: the text is evaluated against that complex background.

This initial impression can then be transformed in several ways, as I compare my impressions with those of others. It can become more conscious and explicit; it can become grounded in the experience of others as well as in my own; and it can be held up against background principles and norms. "Every appraisal of a narrative is implicitly a comparison between the always complex experience we have had in its presence and what we have known before" (p. 71). At this point, Booth cites Samuel Johnson on the contrast between deduction and such experience-based judgments:²

Demonstration [of the sort possible in scientific matters] immediately displays its power, and has nothing to hope or fear from the flux of years; but works tentative and experimental [that is, works that depend on experience] must be estimated by their proportion to the general and collective ability of man, as it is discovered in a long succession of endeavors. (Explanatory supplements supplied by Booth.)

It is a major aim of the book to show that such judgments are not just expressions of subjective whim or political ideology; they can be rational. The model of practical reason is indeed a promising one, though I think more could have been done to give it a detailed philosophical grounding. It has a great deal in common with Aristotle's account of practical wisdom, and also, more recently, with some impressive work on practical reasoning by Charles Taylor.³ Since Booth is not a philosopher, he might have done well to supplement his own discussion with some extended description of related philosophical discussions.

But the account remains attractive; and Booth does convince the reader that skeptics about evaluation are skeptics because they are looking for the wrong sort of argument—failing to find it, they are led to give up on reason altogether. (This is a point on which Taylor has written elo-

2. Samuel Johnson, Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), vol. 7 of The Yale Edition of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, 1968), 60.

3. Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," presented to a conference on The Quality of Life at the World Institute for Development Economic Research, Helsinki, and forthcoming in a volume from the conference, ed. M. Nussbaum and A. Sen.

quently.⁴⁾ We begin to have real trouble, however, when we try to connect the account of coduction with Booth's frequent claims that his view of ethical criticism is "pluralistic." Here I think the absence of explicit philosophy does real damage. For Booth's references to his "pluralism" seem to specify several distinct views, not all consistent with one another, and some of them at odds with the claims he makes for coduction. We need to sort these views out and to ask which one (or ones) his argument actually requires.

We find at least the following positions in the text:

1. *Pluralism as multiplicity of component goods.* Frequently Booth uses the word "pluralism" in connection with the view that there are many distinct and non-homogeneous valuable things, and, therefore, many good roles for literature to play in life. This position is fully compatible, clearly, with his claims for the non-subjectivity of evaluation; and it is an important claim, on which much of his argument relies.

1a. *Pluralism as multiplicity with conflict.* Sometimes this multiplicity of goods generates a tragic tension—as when Booth's love for the warmth and humor of Twain's novel conflicts with his aversion to its paternalism. Here we do get some true statements of the form "X is both good and bad"—but without logical problem, since the good and bad features of the object are distinct, though contingently impossible to separate. Again, there is no threat to objectivity here.

2. *Pluralism as Contextualism.* Sometimes when referring to pluralism, Booth makes statements of the form, "X is both good and bad," in connection with what we might call an Aristotelian contextualism: what is good for you in your circumstances is not necessarily good for me in mine. As Aristotle said, the diet that is good for Milo the wrestler would be ruinous for you and me; or, as Booth observes, it would be good for a moral subjectivist to read and reflect about *The Old Curiosity Shop*, though the same experience might not be so good for someone excessively inclined to dogmatism (p. 68). Again, such claims are an important part of Booth's argument. And again they are not in tension with his claims for the non-subjectivity of evaluation. Judgments must always be sensitive to concrete circumstances; but, given this, there is no reason why we cannot say that this, and not that, is ethically good.

3. *Pluralism as Multiple Specification of the Good.* This position notes that important ethical principles frequently operate at a rather high level of generality, and are susceptible of many concrete specifications, not all of them simultaneously instantiable and each adequate for realizing that principle in practice. Suppose, for example, that one decides that a good human life should make room for friendship, and that what is essential in good friendship is reciprocity and the effort to treat and benefit the other

4. See Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason."

for the other's own sake (as in Aristotle's account). One may then notice that a variety of relationships, concretely very different in kind (in different social traditions, for example), all exhibit those morally valuable characteristics. One cannot have all those forms of friendship together, and perhaps not even in a single society. But they are all similar in their morally relevant characteristics. Pluralism here would consist in saying that all of them are good, though they are in many ways non-compatible. This position is harder to pin down in Booth's book, but I think it is present often enough in many of his tolerant and democratic statements. Here, again, pluralism does not in any way compromise ethical objectivity.

At some points in his argument, however, Booth has a tendency to assert two stronger and more problematic positions. (This happens especially when he is trying to convince the reader that he is no dogmatist.)

4. *Plural world-versions without contradiction.* In the section of the book dealing with cosmological myth, Booth seems to express a view that bears a close relation to Nelson Goodman's pluralism of world-versions,⁵ though Booth does not link his view with Goodman's. This view claims that there are many alternative versions of the world that have value and validity. (It appears that these versions, as Booth describes them, are incommensurable, and thus not in contradiction with one another.) There are standards of rightness by which we can narrow the group of acceptable versions, but we cannot rationally opt for any of the acceptable ones over any other. It is very hard to assess the relationship of this view to the first three uses of pluralism and to the defense of coeducation, since it is philosophically underdeveloped in Booth's text and is never applied to ethics. Such a view need not lead in the direction of ethical relativism or subjectivism, if the many versions are all mutually consistent (or at least not inconsistent), and are simply used for different purposes or in different contexts. On the other hand, some of Booth's examples from religion lead me to suspect that the claim is actually more relativistic than that, and thus more problematic for coeducation.

5. *Plural versions with contradiction.* Finally, there are several places where Booth simply asserts, as an example of his open-minded pluralism, contradictions that I see no way of resolving. Early in the book, he appears to say that he holds both Aristotle's view of friendship and the Christian account (p. 173)—although in many essential respects the two are in direct contradiction (over the worth of the person, the proper basis for love, and so forth). This is a pluralism that leads to ethical confusion. On page 348, Booth explicitly urges the reader to take in, and to believe, a collection of cosmic myths that is "to some degree incoherent and self-contradictory." On page 351, he appears to sympathize with skeptical attacks on logic; and frequently in the last part of the book, he refers to his

5. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

own ethical convictions (for example, his anti-racism) as "my ideology." Wanting to accept and believe all candidates for truth, he reaches the verge of giving up on reason-based ethical judgment.

This more sweeping and problematic pluralism does not seem to be an easily eliminable feature in the book, since Booth makes such assertions often, as if they had some importance. But it should be eliminated, since it is a feature that undermines the book's central argument, and threatens to give the field back to the very opponents—subjectivists and skeptics of many sorts—whom Booth has so ably criticized in the book's earlier parts. I think Booth is, at this point, bending over backwards to answer his real or imagined critics in the literary world, hastening to reassure them that he is no dogmatist, no stuffy defender of logic. He should not bend over so far. First of all, it will not work. Many people will hate this book and will call Booth a reactionary; that is the price he will pay for his defense of reason. Second, it sells out his position. Anti-racism, by Booth's own account, is not just his "ideology." It is an ethical position both defensible and defended by rational argument.

Booth should, I think, retain pluralism as multiplicity, as contextualism, and as multiple specification. He might combine this with some version of Goodman's plural world-versions, if he could spell out the constraints carefully enough. But to tolerate contradiction within practical reason cuts the heart out of the process of coduction, which moves forward by noticing a tension between one claim and another. Booth should hold his head high and ignore the people in the literary world who scoff at non-subjectivism. His books will be around a long time after those fashions have been forgotten.

Friends of books like this one, neither succumbing nor even assenting, argue a lot. The vigor of the criticism this book provokes is a clear sign of its value. Its strength and perceptiveness will enhance the public debate about these urgent questions. That, as Aristotle would say, is civic friendship, and this book is a civic friend.