

author is portraying. The simple language Calvino uses to convey such delicate and deep matters turn the book into an attractive theoretical and practical text. Also, the way his assumptions are exemplified with texts from the past and the present is very clarifying. By doing so, he backs his arguments and helps the reader to visualize the message, providing this work on literary theory - usually a grayish subject - with an unconventional, lively flavour. Brevity and quality are the two key adjectives to describe this book.

On the whole, it is a balanced work thanks to the contrast and complementation between ideas and language, past and present, theory and practice. I think all these characteristics contribute to making the access to literature easier for everybody.

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WAYNE C. BOOTH. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1988. 557 pages.

A reader who is permanently open to an exchange of ideas and a revision of values through fiction: such is the ideal after which, according to Wayne C. Booth, we should try to fashion ourselves if we are to take full advantage of our positions as consumers of literature. For what is being proposed in professor Booth's latest book, *The Company We Keep*, is nothing less than the recovery of the old idea of literature as valuable instruction, which has been neglected in literary studies for more than thirty years.

Doubtless there are specific reasons for that neglect, and Booth takes most of them into account at the very outset of his book. The «rejection of inquiry into

values», as he puts it, that has been brought along by various developments of literary criticism (with the notorious exception of Marxism, where nevertheless the ethical has sometimes been bracketed in favour of the political, or has been considered synonymous with it) is succinctly but didactically examined in the first pages, in a lively description of the most abstract theorizations of art. But it is in the consideration of an alternative form of discussion on books, to which the reader would be able to bring along his/her own personal values and opinions, that this book makes its most important contribution.

Thus Booth makes substantial use of a metaphor that has been long left unused in critical practice, but which was one of the key figures in the humanist discourse on books for more than four centuries: the image of the book as a friend to the reader. The many gifts that such friends may bring to us are analyzed and described in detail: otherness (the approach to a different culture or to a set of world-views that are different from ours), intensity, variety, enjoyment. «Implied author» is the term employed by Booth here: for he takes into account the way in which the very notion of authorship has been relativized in the last decades, and thus distinguishes between the «author» that the rhetoric of the book implies and the actual writer (neither of them is to be confused, moreover, with the narrative voice, which may point to values which do not coincide with those that the implied author wants to promote).

However, the final decision to integrate these values or to reject them, to accept the friendship that the book offers or to dismiss it will rest solely in the reader's hands. Booth does not see the interpretive act as the collective choice of some nebulous «interpretive community», but as the result of a serious and responsible personal investigation carried out by the reader. And it is there, in the field of per-

sonal decisions, that the stakes of ethical criticism are decided. It is to the constitution of the model of «critical self» that he proposes, therefore, that most of the book is dedicated.

But even though the acceptance or rejection of each of these forms of «friendship» is only the decision of the individual reader, the investigation of the different values that are promoted by the potential friends -books- must not necessarily be done by that reader alone. The process of discussion and exploration of books is thus best carried out as a common enterprise, which may lead the reader to a re-evaluation of his/her opinions on specific fictions, and thus to a re-evaluation of the influence that these fictions may have on him/her. The conclusions that are reached thus will be the result of what Booth calls «coeduction»: that is, the process of common interchange and discussion that leads to a renewed awareness of the issues and ethical connotations of specific fictions. Such a project cannot be brought about without a careful examination of the figural language that is predominant in each of the works that we deal with; and here Booth calls our attention to the predominant role of metaphor both in the construction of philosophical concepts and in «literary» language. He is perfectly aware, as the classical rhetoricians were, of the eminently persuasive power of literary figures and of their use as the basis of every form of conceptual thought. Accordingly, he discusses the power of what he names «weapon» metaphors: that is, the metaphors the role of which is to persuade as much as to describe, or those where their function as elements of conceptualization overlaps with their role as persuasive devices. Several heavily metaphoric passages from the writings of novelists such as Norman Mailer or politicians such as Ronald Reagan are discussed here, with surprising and often comic results, and the key point towards which the author

gently leads us is thus slowly but firmly established: the sustained use of these metaphors in the discourses to which they belong implies the possibility of ideal, «metaphorical» worlds which would be the most appropriate context for them, and which the reader is forced to imagine, or to presuppose, through his/her encounter with the texts or fictions in which they are contained. The careful reader will thus try to conceptualize, as closely as possible, the kind of «ideal world» that the author of the book that is being read offers to him/her. After that identification has been made comes the moment of ethical decision; and it is here, in the description of the «self» that learns to make well-informed, serious ethical decisions about books, that Booth is able to make a most fruitful and creative difference in our consideration of the work of the reader.

One of the main aims of M. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is the decentration of monologism, the relativization of all discourse through the analysis of its interaction with all the other discourse and forms of language with which it is interrelated. Booth suggests that the activity of the ethical critic should be similarly subject to a permanent process of decentration. If the notion of «dialogue» has to be taken seriously at all, then this implies a radical questioning of the traditionally assumed idea of a stable, fully fixed self, continuously identical to itself: «Even those who insist on thinking of themselves as individuals are in fact polyphonic and to some degree «heteroglossic» —experiencing voice against voice in what may seem incompatible mixtures.» (p. 238). The only kind of valid dialogue, Booth asserts, is the one in which there is any possibility of having the assumptions and opinions of the participants open to transformation and external influence.

If the reader learns not to forsake his/her own ethical positioning, but be-

comes used to being alert to the limits of that positioning, its interaction with other forms of discourse and its interaction with them, an essential modification of his/her intellectual habits will take place. The same basic principles that he/she brings along to the intercourse with books will remain, but no longer as immutable, absolute principles; they will be flexibilized and respond, in various ways, to the challenge that the experience of reading offers to them, being inevitably transformed in the process. Does this involve an abandonment of serious, coherent commitment to one's own moral positionings? Not necessarily: «While I have given up any notion of being a private individual or «authentic» self, I have not lost anything in the giving up. If each of my roles engages the other roles fully and responsibly, if I do not and cannot cast off my unique collection of roles at will, why should I be anxious about the process of adding and subtracting roles?» (p. 259). What we have here is an abandonment of critical rigidity and a willingness to consider seriously the arguments of others. Only then will a critical process take place that responds seriously and responsibly to ethical issues.

The activity of the ethical reader appears thus to be placed in a position of constant negotiation between two extreme positions. On the one hand, a serious commitment to his/her own ethical standards, on the other, a constant openness to the standards of others, and a willingness to alter his/her original position if necessary. The consequences of such a movement are much more far-reaching than it might seem at first sight. Booth is in fact inviting the reader to put all ethi-

cal positionings, including his/her own, under the sign of provisionality. The basic assumption of an unstable, ever-shifting self, has to be taken seriously: critical dialogue requires the reader to bracket his/her own assumptions in order to consider seriously the argumentation of others.

Surely some of the conclusions of Booth's readings of Rabelais and Lawrence (of his approval of the latter and dismissal of the former on purely ethical grounds); but if this is so, it is because he does not intend to present these readings as the result of some scholarly investigation; only as the result of a personal confrontation with the books written by these authors. This book does not work, after all, towards an ethics of theory or of criticism; only towards an ethics of the reading of fiction. And by doing thus it opens a whole new field of critical investigation: for should we not apply the same techniques that Booth proposes to the various enterprises of literary criticism? The various schools of theory, as Booth adequately points out on several occasions, offer us also several arrays of implied values, and it will be our personal-not collective- responsibility to decide on what occasions, and for what purposes, we make use of them. If we finally begin to be able to do so, it will no doubt be thanks to the insights brought about by the critics who have not neglected the overall importance of ethics-as a field of thought and action which is prior even to political decisions- and, in part at least, by Wayne Booth's timely essay.

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