

REVIEWS

Pertinent to Our Enterprise

The Vocation of a Teacher by Wayne C. Booth (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 353 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by Helen B. Cannon, a freelance writer, teacher of English composition at Utah State University, and an editorial associate of *Dialogue*.

WHY, YOU MAY ASK, review a book on teaching for *Dialogue*? The reasons are several and compelling.

In the first place, author Wayne C. Booth, surely one of the most significant critics now writing in English and perhaps in any language, unashamedly traces his roots to Mormonism. Early in *The Vocation of a Teacher*, explaining his “insane love of literature” (p. 14), he recalls stories absorbed in his Utah childhood about his great-grandfather, Richard Thornton Booth. This self-taught ancestor, born in Lancashire, England, in 1821, had from boyhood such an insatiable desire to learn from books that he worked his trade on the loom with “one hand [and] his legs and feet, leaving the other hand free to hold the book” (p. 15). Though this allowed young Richard to devour books, it left him permanently bent and crippled. It was through a book, the Book of Mormon, that the boy found conversion that transformed his life. As a boy Wayne Booth heard many such stories of salvation found in books, and he retains

still his faith in words as potentially transforming.

Having recognized a 1980 *Dialogue* article, “Art in the Church: Or the Truths of Smoother,” as being indeed by Booth, author of the landmark *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, I thought, “What a coup for *Dialogue*!” The style, wit, and wisdom of this Mormon version of “The Screwtape Letters” were unmistakable. Mormonism honors certain luminaries and tends to ignore others. Sports figures, entertainers, entrepreneurs receive recognition in the pages of *This People* and the *Ensign*. A prominent literary critic probably shouldn’t be expected to make a ripple in the popular press, but he should find notice, and even praise, in the scholarly sector.

More important, though, than his heritage and professional reputation is what Wayne C. Booth offers to readers in general and to *Dialogue* readers in particular. Booth admits to his life-long attempts to extend human awareness and understanding, and more precisely, to join minds through language. *Dialogue*, too, has been devoted to these same goals—to the critical understanding of words, to considerations of rhetoric beyond passive or blind acceptance, to developing a special alertness to the rhetorics of “pabulum and poison” that invade our culture.

As a reader on *Dialogue*’s editorial board, I read many submissions that could benefit from what Booth teaches about

clarity and integrity in writing and thought. As jargons become ever more recondite, it becomes apparent that those most committed to dialogue and understanding often have difficulty making their thoughts accessible to others. Booth's "Occasion 3: The Scholar in Society" (the book is a collection of "Occasions"—reworked talks, lectures, and writings) ought to be required reading for every *Dialogue* contributor.

Booth's challenge for this speaking "occasion" has been to "say something useful to the would-be scholar about how to relate the scholarly role to society" (p. 45). With characteristic thoroughness, Booth first examines exact meanings of *scholar*, *intellectual*, and *society*. Dismissing as chauvinistic the old joke that an intellectual is "a man who has found something more interesting in the world than sex" and as simplistic the definition wherein "an intellectual is said to have read an article on a given subject, while the scholar has read a book" (p. 45), Booth looks seriously at true scholarship and at the functions of such scholarship in society. How applicable his requisites should be to LDS scholars. He raises the question of autonomy—a question terribly relevant to journals of "alternate voices" in the Church nowadays. I look back through twenty years of *Dialogue* and ask myself some of Booth's posed questions:

What may have been published for the sake of scholars' autonomy that has been boring or unintelligible to readers?

What did certain submissions contribute to the vitality of [Church] culture?

Was the research dictated by a genuine desire to learn something, or were

the authors motivated by self-serving "unscholarship"?

Shouldn't Mormonism's scholarly community, and every right-reasoned society, "keep the rational habits [of true scholarship] passionately alive"? (p. 74) Booth would agree with Primo Levi's assertion, "We must not write as if we were alone. As long as we live we have a responsibility; we must answer for what we write, word by word, and make sure that every word reaches its target" (*Other People's Trades* [New York: Summit Books, 1989], p. 174).

Many of Booth's "Occasions" deal with his dedication to teaching these honest rhetorical habits of thought. He does not care for academic snobbery, for "publish or perish" threats that diminish a university's central purpose of teaching, nor does he approve of the "star" system of grants and awards that tends to reward those who pull away from undergraduate teaching to pursue their own stardom.

For Booth, "rhetoric" is a broad and idealistic term, extending far beyond the subject of English. While recognizing that for many the term connotes "verbal trickery or deliberate obfuscation" (p. 108), Booth sees it as the discipline of teaching others to think analytically. Sometimes I agree with one of his colleagues who wishes Booth would "abandon the sleazy term altogether," opting for something like "philosophy of discourse" or "theory of communication" (p. 309). In a courageous talk to the managers of *Time*, Booth challenged them to "raise the critical powers and mental habits of their readers," rather than catering to and reinforcing "a flat and stupified credulity, . . . [where] the audience is presumed to be incapable of asking that old-fashioned question, 'What's the evidence?'" (p. 143).

Many LDS readers have a problem beyond the incapacity to ask. There is the fear abroad that it might, in fact, be sinful to ask about the evidence. Yet free agency is central to our belief, and as Booth points out, "When we are manipulated, we are not free" (p. 177). Only in the right kind of knowledge can we make free choices. We cannot recover meanings richer than our own small minds (p. 184). "The limits of my language are the limits of my world," said Wittgenstein. Booth would broaden our worlds through language. Liberation, too, he asserts, extends beyond indoctrination, which also enslaves us to the opinions of others.

A large part of Booth's own success as a scholar and teacher, I suggest, lies in his warmth and deep humanity. "There are . . . worse failures," he admits, "than never learning to think. Never learning to love, never learning to enjoy laughter or music, never knowing friendship—these kinds of binding would seem to me even more tragic than never learning to think. But if anything is clear about recent experiments in anti-rational lifestyles, it is that even loving and laughing and friendship and making music can be poisoned by thoughtlessness" (p. 189).

Though this book is obviously not a religious text, there is something religious about its presentation. A religious quality—in the best sense of the word—informs his style, and apparently his life. In his imaginative flights, biblical tone and idiom come naturally to Booth, and his "English Teacher's Decalogue" seems transcribed from stone tablets. In a more deeply religious way, Booth emerges from the page as a kindly, democratic, humble man. Those qualities inform his teaching, surely, and his "Teacher's Journal" section is candid and helpful to anyone who teaches, including those called to teach in

the Church. LDS Sunday teachers, unfortunately, though, have little opportunity to apply Booth's pedagogic wisdom, since their time has been pared away, to the extent that little substantive teaching interchange can occur.

As Booth says, a teacher can never tell where his influence stops. He remembers teachers and learning experiences from his undergraduate days at BYU. Now on the lecture circuit himself, Booth recalls the Lyceum series held in the Provo Tabernacle, where he listened "with every nerve, hoping for views from the great world." But it was his high school chemistry teacher in American Fork who managed to transform in one year "a more or less unquestioning young Mormon believer into—well it's hard to summarize the beliefs of a flaming youth who emerged from that year" (p. 298).

His last Occasion, "Epilogue on the Idea of a University," addresses the question of how we might speak as specialists and yet make ourselves understood. Booth is his own best example; this book is accessible, engaging, and highly relevant. He calls for ways to combat the "ethnocentrism of disciplines," the "tribalism" and "nationalism" of specialties (p. 325). Booth's suggestions are reasonable and, I'm tempted to say, brilliant and ought to be required reading for specialists in any field, including religious disciplines.

He concludes the book with his own law of fructification (rather than parsimony): "Never pursue a problem without at least two hypotheses—and don't despair when two or more of them survive your tests. And never forget that all human problems resist reduction to any one formulation or method of inquiry" (p. 334). What of this law is not pertinent to our enterprise?