

REVIEWS

A Plurality of Competing Selves

Wayne C. Booth. *My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006. 321 pp. Cloth: \$34.95; paper: \$24.95 paper.

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Wayne C. Booth's autobiography is unusual for its genre. My first response, quite frankly, was disappointment. Unlike some authors who deem their life stories important enough to publish, Booth chose not to celebrate his tremendous successes. He tells us little about teaching awards, critically acclaimed scholarship, positions of great responsibility, the money he made, or even a strong sense of personal satisfaction with his life. Instead, he chose to write a rhetorically sophisticated critical autobiography. Its basic premise is the rejection of the idea of a unified self and its replacement by a plurality of often competing selves. Thus, the book focuses on a set of internal and external conflicts among the various selves. This device, obviously, could easily have turned into a simplistic account of conflicts between good selves and evil selves, or an attempt to replace worse selves with better selves. At times, it comes perilously close to being just that.

The book is redeemed by its creation of dialogues among the many selves, dialogues that never promise a final truth about a single self. These dialogues are at various times brutally honest, contradictory, shallow, gently loving, and seriously intellectual. They address personal moral failings, perceptions of weakness, moments of achievement, and great personal loss. The work taken together produces what the title promises: a plausible harmony among the selves. In this review, I will address three aspects of the work that help to produce that harmony and that make the book worth the effort of reading it: method, Mormonism, and morality.

Method

Wayne Booth the literary critic and theorist is best known for his commitment to two methods of understanding texts: rhetorical criticism

and pluralism. Both are present in his autobiography from beginning to end. In fact, one could easily say that the autobiography is as much an attempt to show the limits and powers of the methods as it is an attempt to tell a story of his life.

Booth's rhetorical criticism is effective because he understands the complex relationships among authors and readers, orators and audiences. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he postulates that authors are mixed selves: actual and implied. The actual author is the person who writes. The implied author is the author the text desires the reader to infer from it. By making such a distinction, Booth separates the actual author from the text and strongly suggests that the author whom readers engage is as much a part of the text as that author is a person whose intentions inform a work of fiction. Booth does not deny intentionality, but he certainly complicates it. The same holds true for readers. The implied reader is the reader an author imagines, the person he or she hopes will read the novel. The actual reader is the person, desired or not, who actually reads. *My Many Selves* overtly employs these distinctions.

The autobiography is rhetorically complicated by the presence of multiple texts by the same author. The first is the collection of journals Booth kept over his lifetime. The second is material written by the contemporary Booth, who is interpreting and editing those original texts. Thus, we get Booth the actual author, Booth the implied author, Booth the implied reader, and Booth the actual reader. The rhetorical situation is even more complicated by the other implied and actual readers, those of us Booth hoped for and those who actually choose to read the book. The complexity leads to a very rich interplay among perspectives: Booth interpreting Booth, being interpreted by the reader, etc.

At the same time, the book is unabashed in its awareness that multiple authors and readers generate multiple perspectives. Booth chooses to present us with a plurality of Booths, characters as it were, who represent different perspectives from which to consider his life. These characters include a puritan, a lover, a luster, a hypocrite, an ambitious man, an idealist, a Marxist, a bourgeois, a cheerful poser, a very private griever, a soldier who conscientiously objects, a petty thief, a conscientious giver, a comforter, a generalist, a musician and a true scholar. We meet other characters: WayneB, WayneC, VainB, HypocriteB, MoralB, AmbitionB, etc. All of them, under the direction of our implied author, engage in meaningful dialogue about the actual Wayne C. Booth. The method is risky but ulti-

mately satisfying, because at times it coaxes out genuine wisdom. One of the sources of that wisdom is his lifelong engagement with Mormons and Mormonism.

Among the Mormons

Many readers of *Dialogue* will be especially interested in how this lapsed Mormon, who achieved so much in his life, engaged the church and culture of his childhood. In this book, the engagement is often superficial, with Mormonism serving as a weak straw man against which to measure Booth's escape from a parochial culture he remembers, without much critical evaluation of his often superficial and immature responses to it. As an intellectually gifted young man in American Fork and then Provo, Utah, Booth found himself constrained by claims to certainty he found to be parochial, naive, and dogmatic. He overtly rejects Mormonism's "monolithic dogmatic truth" (12). At times, he emphasizes the certainty he cannot abide with italics, as in "*The one true faith*" or "*This is the place*" (5). His own naive certainty, which later in the book he calls being "deflected by too much 'Enlightenment' rationalism" (306), protests that "the thinker in me had cast off dogmatic ignorance and could now pursue truth, obtain learning, even become genuinely wise" (6-7). He comes across as a very smug, overconfident scholarship boy and appears not to realize that many other intellectuals made peace with the same doubts and found happy lives inside the Church by helping change those very attitudes. Thus, having become a "scientific" truth seeker, he believed he could rationalize himself into giving away his faith. Indeed, by early adulthood, he had convinced himself to become an atheist. He turned his back not only on Mormonism but also on religion.

Beyond the problem of absolute certainty, which is a life-long concern, Booth also focuses on his family's readiness, which he attributes to Mormonism, to deal harshly with "lapsers." He tells the story of a visit from the California side of the family who had slid away from the faith and recalls their treatment by his Utah County family as hypocrisy. His family's actions, familiar to many who grew up in strict and judgmental homes, Mormon or otherwise, were not very Christian: "They were always treated with explicit contempt behind their backs and with implicit anxiety and sometimes even open exhortation when they visited" (11). He goes on to express frustration with "piety tests" (14) like the Word of Wisdom, violations of which he deems relatively harmless. He decries Church

leaders who seem to hide the facts about LDS history and replace them with myths of Mormon moral superiority to all other peoples in the world. There is nothing surprising about this; in fact, today it seems more like a caricature or cliché than serious engagement with the culture.

What, then, does his engagement with his Mormon past reveal? The clichéd response would describe Mormons as “those dogmatic faithful ones [who] threaten the world with ignorance and intolerance.” Here is the revelation: “Now I see this as a gross distortion. Those ‘dogmatic faithful ones’ are on average among the most generous-spirited, most admirable of human creatures” (7). The earlier, clichéd response still crops up throughout the book, but there is also a generosity of spirit that suggests Booth made peace with the past. “Even now the contrast between the lives lived by insiders and those of many lapsed shocks me and sometimes drives me back toward being fully active” (7). It reveals the admirable side of a lifelong pursuit of “the deepest of all human values: understanding—sympathetic, serious listening to others” (133). Booth’s most profound offer to his readers is a guide to the morality of understanding, derived from his commitment to pluralism.

Morality (Ethics)

At what now looks to be a crucial moment in Booth’s career, he received a grant from the Ford Foundation to read “ethical philosophy on my own” (215). His work afterward suggests that it was a genuine turning point for many reasons. Among other things, he sought to learn “the genuine philosophical grounds for ethical judgments” (215). Perhaps the most important remnant of his upbringing was his ongoing desire not only to live a moral life but also to discover the intellectual grounds for ethical behavior. A side-effect of the search was the discovery that as an atheist, “the philosophers’ Gods made more and more sense to me” (215). But the crux of the effort was to discover a way to think well about ideas that are deceptively simple and often overlooked.

This book barely scratches the surface of what Booth discovered, practiced, and taught about the ethical life of the mind. But Booth does give us a glimpse of his search into “the central moral questions, what is good for us and what isn’t, and how can we come to any kind of agreement about such questions” (218). The key for Booth is agreement. The exclusivist attitudes of his childhood and youth are replaced by an honest quest for understanding, both intellectual and ethical. The place from which the quest begins is the realization that “I can’t hope for anything de-