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Introduction: the turn to ethics in the 1990s

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This volume starts from the perception that in 'advanced' literary circles for most of the 1970s and 1980s, few topics could have been more uninteresting, more dépassé, less likely to attract budding young theorists, than the topic Ethics and Literature. For most of that period, explicit 'ethical criticism', to borrow Wayne Booth's phrase, had 'fallen on hard times'.[1] I will say nothing about what Booth might have regarded as the good times for ethical criticism, the 1950s and 1960s, that period when straw dinosaurs walked the earth – we are perhaps still too close to those times to say anything useful about them. On the other hand, there is reason to think that, at the more humble level of undergraduate pedagogy at least, ethical criticism has continued on among us alive and well. Frederic Jameson, one of the most vehement critics of ethical interests in literature, said fifteen years ago that when most teachers or students of literature ask of a novel or a poem, 'What does it mean?', the predominant 'code' in terms of which an answer is expected is the 'ethical'. 'What does *Lord Jim* mean?', for example, is a coded demand that we talk about the moral conflicts of the hero. Jameson's point is that literature, even the latest novel, always comes to us through what he calls 'sedimented reading habits and categories developed by . . . inherited interpretive traditions'.[2] Put simply, when our

[1] Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, 1988), chapter 2.
[2] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981), p. 9.

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critical traditions are formed by the likes of Aristotle, Pope, Dr Johnson, Matthew Arnold, Henry James, F. R. Leavis, and Lionel Trilling, it is small wonder that we highly educated Western readers may share a prejudice (in Gadamer's sense) in favour of both ethical interpretation and literature that offers moral insight. Indeed, what we think important enough to call 'literature' in the first place will be partly constituted by the demand that works offer such insight. If this is circular, it is less a vicious circle than an hermeneutical one, and something about which we can be reasonably relaxed.

Despite these traditional presumptions about literature and the ethical, or perhaps because of them, most avant-garde Anglo-American literary theory in recent years has been either more or less silent about ethics or deeply suspicious of it. The oddness of this state of affairs is registered by a number of contributors to this volume: Charles Altieri, Tony Coady and Seumas Miller, Cora Diamond and Simon Haines. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford, 1990), Martha Nussbaum talks of the strange 'absence of the ethical' in literary theory. She notes that amidst literary theory's deep interests in such areas of philosophy as epistemology, semantics, and ontology, and despite its multitudinous references to figures such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, the work of leading contemporary moral philosophers such as John Rawls, Bernard Williams, and Thomas Nagel is hardly noticed at all. This is especially hard to understand, she says, as it is a time of great ferment in moral philosophy: 'One cannot find for generations – since the time of John Stuart Mill, if not earlier – an era in which there has been so much excellent, adventurous, and varied work on the central ethical and political questions of human life.' Nussbaum goes on to suggest that in view of the importance of this work, literary theory's apparent uninterest in it is itself significant:

it signals a further striking absence: the absence, from literary theory, of the organising questions of moral philosophy, and of moral philosophy's sense of urgency about these questions. The sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live – this sense of practical importance, which animates contemporary ethical theory and has always animated much of great literature, is absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists. (pp. 169–70)

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The urgency of Nussbaum's own tone shouldn't lead us to over-look the fact that there has been engaged, urgent, practice-oriented literary theory in the past twenty years. Most of it has been political, concerned with issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. But what Nussbaum calls 'the organising questions of moral philosophy', and specifically the question of how we should live, are rarely if ever explicitly addressed.

But then does this lack of explicitness necessarily mean there has been an 'absence of the ethical', or at least a significant turn away from it, in Anglo-American literary theory and criticism in the seventies and eighties? One answer is surely not: the period has been dominated by forms of political and post-structuralist criticism that are at the very least implicitly ethical. According to this view, ethical criticism has remained the predominant mode of criticism in this period. This is Wayne Booth's argument in *The Company We Keep*. What he calls the 'new overtly ethical and political' feminist, neo-Marxist, and anti-racist movements, as well as the earlier structuralist and deconstructive 'formalism', both 'have an ethical program in mind' (p. 5).

To this extent, I would agree with Booth. These days, even the most linguistically focused recovery of the marginalised Other of a logocentric philosophical or literary text at least implicitly links itself with the defence of those who have been Other to Western imperialism, to patriarchy or to bourgeois interests. As Seyla Benhabib puts it, one of the defining perceptions of this period is that the 'logic of binary oppositions is also a logic of subordination and domination'.[3] It is hard to see how a concern with such evils as 'subordination and domination' is not at least implicitly oriented towards a conception of a good life centring around goods such as freedom, self-expression, and self-realisation. And in practice, some forms of feminism especially have explicitly developed a picture of human flourishing not simply in terms of 'thin' concepts such as social justice and equality but also drawing on 'thicker' conceptions of human character which tend to revalue such goods as connectedness, emotional responsiveness, and care as alternatives to an allegedly masculinist concern with moral autonomy, rationality, and obligation. Of all the various forms of the politics of difference that have emerged strongly in the past

[3] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 15.

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twenty years, feminism (see Annette Baier's 'Ethics in many different voices', below) has perhaps gone further than the others in recognising the need for explicit debate over such central questions in moral philosophy as the role of traditions, essences, and universals.

At the same time, some forms of feminism and much neo-Marxist criticism and literary theory have been at the very least ambivalent towards the whole sphere of the ethical. For example, Terry Eagleton's influential book, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, veers between a somewhat reductive view of ethics and a fuller and more adequate one. On the one hand, the moral is restricted to a meiopic concern with 'immediate interpersonal relations', as opposed to the political, which can put such relations into the broader view of 'our whole material conditions of existence'. The assumption is that to see things politically, from a neo-Marxist perspective, is to see them as they are, 'in their full implications' (p. 208). In their chapter, C. A. J. Coady and Seumas Miller ('Literature, power, and the recovery of philosophical ethics') talk in detail about this sort of view, which boils down to the idea that the ethical is ideological, or a form of false consciousness, the true alternative to which is political consciousness. But Eagleton does not quite go that far here and argues that political argument is what he calls '*genuine* moral argument', which implicitly concedes that moral thought might extend well beyond the sphere of 'immediate interpersonal relations'. Here Eagleton goes some way towards a more adequate conception of the ethical, one which recognises that ultimately there is no excluding the question 'How should a human being live?' from political reflection, any more than we can permanently exclude the political from reflection on interpersonal relations. Richard Bernstein, in his book on the 'ethical–political horizons of post-modernity', is surely right when he says that although 'we can distinguish ethics and politics, they are inseparable. For we cannot understand ethics without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities. And there is no understanding of politics that does not bring us back to ethics.'[4] (In part 3, Martha Nussbaum insists on the same point in her 'Literary imagination in public life'.) To underline this inseparability, Bernstein uses the phrase

[4] Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical–Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 9.

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'ethical–political', which is an attractive solution in some ways, and one which reminds us of why Booth was right in calling all the political movements that have dominated literary discourse in recent years forms of ethical criticism.

But the reason why we cannot simply talk of the 'ethical–political' at this stage, and the main reason why Booth's argument is inadequate, is that one dominant vein of political criticism in recent years has been hostile to ethics and has either ignored it or disavowed any connection with it. This is the vein represented in its least compromising form by Frederic Jameson. In his work, Marxism becomes a master-narrative in terms of which ethics must be constantly deconstructed. The essential thrust of Jameson's case against ethics is that it legitimates by universalising into a system of binary moral oppositions the characteristics of one group or class *versus* another, so that 'evil' inevitably denotes imagined characteristics of those who are Other to the hegemonic group. Thus ethics is an ideological mask of the will-to-power of the dominant class, or, as others would put it, race or gender.

It is reasonable to concede that ethics *can* be ideological in this way. Ethics can be unconsciously masculinist or bourgeois, unwittingly privileging a certain sort of gender-biased conception of autonomous rationality or certain class-biased conceptions of social order. Indeed I would want to suggest that one of the permanently valuable legacies of the political literary theory of the seventies and eighties has been precisely to keep reminding us of the historically and culturally contingent basis of formations like ethics and the so-called literary canon, which therefore cannot be unproblematically conceived of as timeless or universal.[5] On the other hand, the characteristic weakness of such theory has been to suggest that that such formations are *nothing but* the masks of ideology. It is this 'nothing but' which is the signal weakness of Jameson's enterprise, a weakness with significant ethical implications.

One important element of Jameson's case is his claim that ethics is inevitably 'judgmental', following a simple binary pattern of me

[5] There has, of course, been a great deal of discussion in recent years of precisely this point. See for example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, *Re-thinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge, 1992); David Parker, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (Cambridge, 1994).

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and my group 'good', the Other and her group 'evil'. Once again, it is reasonable to concede that moral judgments can be like this and often are. Judgmentalism (or 'moralism'– see Coady, below) is a permanent possibility within ethics so long as my focus on the perceived difference between me and the Other is not qualified by a perception of commonality between us. Where Jameson's account is deficient, however, is in not recognising this perception of commonality as a possibility *within ethics*, a possibility which is, after all, central in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The *locus classicus* is the familiar gospel story of the woman taken in adultery: the Pharisees are ready to stone her to death as they are bound by law to do, until they are prompted to look into their consciences and see that none of them is without sin either. That is, they are prompted to recognise an element of commonality with her, at which moment they transcend the self/other binarism of their judgmental attitude. In 'Common understanding and individual voices' (part 3), Raimond Gaita discusses the ethical implications of what he calls 'the ''we'' of fellowship' as opposed to cultural and other classificatory forms of judgmentalism.

My claim is that, partly constituted as we in Western societies are by the Judeo-Christian tradition, among others, non-judgmentalism is not merely an abstract possibility for us, but one which is part of our cultural milieu and identity. In fact the very term, 'non-judgmental', surely owes its modern connotation to a tradition of spiritual and moral discrimination mediated to us, among other ways, by our literature: by *Measure for Measure* or *The Scarlet Letter* or *Daniel Deronda*, the subject of Lisabeth During's chapter in the first part of this book. And these are only some of the most explicit examples.

Another claim I would make is that judgmentalism, the powerful temptation in us to divide the world self-righteously into simple binaries, is a possibility within any belief system that is oriented towards some conception of the good, be it religious, ethical, or political. Pharisaism is as much a temptation of Marxism or feminism as it is of any theological creed or moral commitment: all can degenerate into dividing the world rigidly into sheep and goats. And all can search out the goats, and all the secret ideological hiding-places of goatism, with puritanical self-righteousness. What begins as a just project for the proper political recognition of difference can easily tip over into a zealous

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intolerance of it. It is this intolerance that has come to be called 'political correctness'.

One powerful reason why an explicit ethical criticism is needed as well as political criticism, and why Booth is seriously mistaken in simply conflating them, emerges from this example of judgmentalism. The example shows why there is permanent need for a criticism that foregrounds the organising questions of ethics, a need for an ethical vocabulary in which to articulate the humanly destructive impulses that can lurk precisely in the thirst for righteousness, including political righteousness. My point is that just as ethics can have a political unconscious, so politics can have an ethical unconscious, which expresses itself nowhere more dangerously than when it tries to repress specifically ethical reflection altogether. What follows is that there is also permanent need for a literary discourse that goes further than ideological demystification and puts us back in touch with those most complex and exhaustive forms of ethical inquiry available, classic works of literature.

But then to talk so blandly about literature and ethical inquiry is surely to forget where we are in time, to forget that we do not simply live post-Marx and post-Nietzsche, but post-Saussure and perhaps post-Derrida. Once again, not quite so, according to Booth. When we turn to the more formalist end of the theoretical and critical spectrum of the seventies and eighties, that is, to deconstruction, we discover that, as Booth put it, even this displays 'a belief that a given way of reading . . . is what will do us most good'.

There are two important points to be made here. First, there has been significant work in the past few years persuasively arguing precisely Booth's point. For example, Tobin Siebers in his book *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca, 1988) points to the tacit ethics of post-structuralist theory and criticism. As Siebers says: 'Whether we assert a theory of the self or deny it, we remain within the sphere of ethics' (p. 5); in other words, we draw, even if only sketchily, some picture of human character, some vision of human flourishing. But the second thing that needs to be said on this subject is that very recently deconstruction has begun to present its way of reading texts, its rigorous resistance to closure, as an ethical imperative. Viewed in this way, the ethical imperative is a dynamic within language itself to which deconstructive reading is

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alone properly responsive. This has been something of a sub-theme in the work of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Paul de Man, but it has suddenly become a major theme in the past five or six years with the publication of Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987) and Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (New York, 1987). The contemporary importance of this theme is emphasised by two recent books, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford, 1992) by Simon Critchley, and *Getting it Right: Language, Literature and Ethics* (Chicago, 1992), by Geoffrey Galt Harpham. The interest, or cluster of interests, expressed in all these works in the points of intersection between post-structuralism and ethics was hardly visible at all ten years ago. This is important evidence for the claim that there has been a significant and recent turn to the ethical in literary studies.

But then if it seems so clear now that post-structuralism, like political criticism, was always already crypto-ethical if not explicitly so, why was that not so clear ten years ago in literary theory's confident expansive phase? The reason is that, like much political criticism of the period, post-structuralism seemed to be antipathetic in several significant ways to any interest in what would seem the most obvious ethical dimension of literature, that is to say, the narrative or dramatic presentation of moral questions, dilemmas, embodied in characters, imagined agents, lives, selves or subjectivities.

Deconstruction ruled out such moral interest in at least two ways. First, it has insisted that literary meaning is finally undecidable, so the very notion of determinate 'moral questions' or 'dilemmas' is defeated in the end by the instabilities within language itself. Secondly, deconstruction has presented the inner life of moral deliberation, intentionality and choice not as something prior to language but as a mere effect of language. Thus the supposedly autonomous rational subject of Kantian ethics is de-centred into the various different discourses of which he is constituted. In this way, any interest in character or imagined characters, selves or subjects is displaced by a rigorous attention to the differential system of signs in which such 'traces' allegedly have their only being. A number of authors in this volume, including Altieri, Freadman, and Wiltshire, reject such eviscerated accounts of agency and argue that various forms of 'literary' discourse – poetry, autobiography, pathography – reflect complex modes of

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individual agency and envision new modes that such agency might take.

By a curious twist it is precisely the deconstruction of (humanist) Ethics which has now emerged (along with much new attention to Emmanuel Levinas) as the Ethics of Deconstruction. A key starting point in this enterprise is the following passage from Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, 1979):

Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two value systems. In this sense, ethics has nothing to do with the will ... of a subject, nor *a fortiori,* with a relationship between subjects. The ethical category is imperative ... to the extent that it is linguistic and not subjective. Morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as 'man' or 'love' or 'self', and not the cause and consequence of such concepts. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion. Ethics ... is a discursive mode among others.

I find a great deal of interest in this view of the ethical, but believe that anyone embracing it needs to answer the following set of challenges. Does not de Man here fall into the philosophical trap referred to by Richard Bernstein as the 'grand Either/Or'? That is, is he not offering us a set of false alternatives? Either subjectivity is a transcendental signified or it is just an effect of language; either morality is grounded in such metaphysical concepts as 'man', 'love', or 'self' or it is nothing but a 'language aporia'. And in the end, does this not amount to saying that either morality is as conceived by Kant or it is nothing substantive at all?

There is of course an alternative view that de Man may not have been aware of in the late seventies, but which can hardly be missed by anyone reading moral philosophy today. The version of it that seems to me to offer the most serious challenge to deconstruction is Charles Taylor's. In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge, 1985), Taylor argues that all the interesting insights in the relations between subjectivity and language lie in the space between two extreme hypotheses, each of which gives one of the terms absolute priority over the other. The first, what post-Saussureans call logocentrism, 'centres everything on the subject, and exalts a quite unreal model of self-clarity and control', which obscures the fact that the 'speaking agent' is enmeshed in larger forms of order (including the linguistic), 'which he can

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never fully oversee, and can only marginally and punctually refashion'. The opposite extreme hypothesis is post-Saussurean-ism itself, which posits a view of 'the code as ultimate, dominating the supposedly autonomous agent'. What Taylor calls the 'space between' these extreme hypotheses consists firstly of the idea that we are only moral subjects at all because we are parts of a language community; we are only deliberating agents or selves within what he calls society's 'webs of interlocution'. (See Altieri, below, for his related notion of 'a grammatical vision of social interdependency'.) But at the same time, the practical reason that is the cornerstone of ethics can only begin in what Taylor calls our 'moral intuitions'. These intuitions are indeed partly constituted by language and culture, but it is reductive and in any case *beside the point* to regard them as mere effects of language. To think of them in this way violates what he calls the 'B.A. [best account] Principle'. In *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, 1989), Taylor spends a great deal of time with the question of why we should regard any 'thin' account of ethics, which includes any naturalistic or sceptical reduction of it, as the best account we can give. He asks the question: 'What ought to trump the language in which I actually live my life?' In doing so, he makes the crucial point that the virtue of this lived 'thick' language is that it expresses our moral intuitions in a way that the 'thin' language does not. His point is that any language that does not allow us to express these is language about something else, a language which is subtly constraining us to talk about another subject.

But if our moral ontology springs from the best account of the human domain we can arrive at, and if this account must be in anthropocentric terms, terms which relate to the meanings things have for us, then the demand to start outside of all such meanings, not to rely on our moral intuitions or on what we find morally moving, is in fact a proposal to change the subject.[6]

When he talks here of the demand to start outside of the 'meanings things have for us', Taylor's principal target is that naturalistic reduction of ethics which demands that all conversations begin in a scientific or 'absolute conception' of things. But what he says applies equally to any account of the human domain that would make language itself 'ultimate' and demand that we start from the

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[6] Taylor's *Sources of the Self,* p. 72.