Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years there has been a renewed interest in the ethical content of literature. Although the reasons for this change of focus are complex, if one had to identify a single event that marked the turn, a good choice would be the revelation of Paul de Man's wartime journalism and the ensuing, heated debate.[1] Certainly few of de Man's opponents made the irresponsible case that there was a *necessary* connection between his tainted past and his subsequent career as arguably the most prominent deconstructionist in the American academy, but it was not necessary to do so in order to bring about a rethinking of deconstruction. The claim that there was nothing *inconsistent* in his early collaboration and later theorizing proved damaging enough. While defenders sometimes tried to demonstrate that there was an implicit ethics in de Man's theory, this effort proved unconvincing given his explicit disdain for anything that we might normally think of as ethical considerations. In "The Resistance to Theory," he made clear that any contamination of literary studies with either psychology or ethics might lead in a direction vastly inferior to his own method: "The equation of rhetoric with psychology rather than with epistemology opens up dreary prospects of pragmatic banality, all the drearier if compared to the brilliance of the [i.e., my] performative analysis."[2] De Man does recognize that there is something called ethics, but what it amounts to is a recognition of his particular view of epistemology: "In this sense, ethics has nothing to do with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor *a fortiori*, with a relationship between subjects. The ethical category is imperative (i.e., a category rather than a value) to the extent that

[1] See Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism: 1939–1943* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. by Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

[2] Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 19.

it is linguistic and not subjective."[3] Morality in its traditional sense, then, is merely a linguistic construct, of necessity tainted by the inadequacy of language to get at truth: "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 or consequence of such concepts."[4] There is nothing in de Man that would suggest any ethical imperative beyond subscribing to the "insight" that we are forever trapped in this linguistic web.

Thus, de Man – and he was hardly alone in this among the deconstructionists – summarily dismissed those who busied themselves with ethical considerations as philosophically naïve. Such concerns were flat-footed, it was intimated, and best left to the sclerotic descendants of Matthew Arnold, unfit for the rigors of continental thought.[5] De Man found support for his position in an early, unpublished essay of Nietzsche's, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Außermoralischen Sinn," that "flatly states the necessary subversion of truth by rhetoric as the distinctive feature of all language."[6] This epistemological skepticism quickly leads to an unmasking of morality as "originat[ing] out of lies." While de Man's reading of this youthful essay is legitimate, he took this to be a position that Nietzsche maintained to the end of his life – a far more dubious claim, but one that allowed de Man to enlist the authority of Nietzsche as ratification of his own view.[7] Buoyed by this alliance, de Man felt no need to engage in the rich tradition of moral philosophy, a move that was consistent with deconstruction's overall complaint against Western philosophy as suffering from "logocentrism." The influence of de Man can be seen most clearly in J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), a book whose limitations are suggested by the very title. Miller's diminished sense of ethical obligation requires nothing more than a willingness to read with the skepticism of a deconstructionist. This alone constitutes "the ethical moment."[8] Schooled in suspicion, the ethical reader would be able to exercise his

[3] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 206.
[4] Ibid., p. 206.
[5] Alice Jaegar Kaplan recalls how de Man taught his graduate students contempt for such horrors as "New Critical Moral Earnestness." See Alice Jaeger Kaplan, "Paul de Man, *Le Soir*, and the Francophone Collaboration," in *Responses*, p. 278.
[6] De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 110.
[7] De Man claims that Nietzsche's corpus is an "endlessly repeated gesture [in favor of truth as rhetoric]" but for a far more convincing and subtle account of Nietzsche's evolving position on truth see Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Also helpful is Brian Leiter, "Perspectivism in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), pp. 334–57.
[8] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 4.

moral intelligence by, for example, enjoying the pages of Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* as a "comedy."[9] One can see the immediate appeal this might have to faculty and students in literature departments who could now claim a mastery of, and even more intoxicatingly *over*, material they needn't painstakingly work through, yet it had the unfortunate effect of prescinding the study of literature from the long and sophisticated philosophical conversation about ethics.

Thus, when it came time to look for a rejuvenation of ethics, literary scholars turned reflexively to Derrida and Foucault rather than moral philosophy. In a generally even-handed and accurate assessment of the state of ethical criticism near the turn of the century, Lawrence Buell notes: "No major ethical philosopher from Aristotle to Rawls has attracted anywhere near the attention among those currently linking literature and ethics that Derrida and Foucault have attracted (neither of them ethicists in any strict sense)."[10] Buell's estimation of Derrida's relationship to ethical theory is confirmed in Derrida's response to a collection of critical essays devoted to his work:

> What is the ethicity of ethics? The morality of morality? What is responsibility? What is the "What is?" in this case? etc. These questions are always urgent. In a certain way they must remain urgent and unanswered, at any rate without a general and rule-governed response, without a response other than that which is linked specifically each time, to the occurrence of a decision without rules and without will in the course of a new test of the undecidable.[11]

The line of argument is familiar: because we can never know with certainty, insistence on ethical categories and principles can only be an act of *mauvaise foi*. Instead, Derrida finds far more congenial the thinking of the transcendental philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. Lévinas had studied with both Husserl and Heidegger at Freiburg in the late twenties, and, while deeply influenced by each, began to break away when he came to question the primacy of the Cartesian ego that Husserl took as his starting point. His eventual difference from Heidegger is subtler, but, if I am being fair to both thinkers, appears to consist in a reconfiguration of the relationship between Heidegger's Dasein (being in the world) and Mitsein (being with). For Heidegger Dasein entails Mitsein, but the interpersonal is

[9] Ibid., p. 13
[10] Lawrence Buell, "In Pursuit of Ethics," *PMLA*, vol. 114, no. 1 (January 1999), 11.
[11] Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. James Wood (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992), pp. 16–17.

subordinate to Dasein's authenticity, its responsibility to itself. Lévinas, in effect, makes Mitsein primordial by positing a "first philosophy" that makes the relationship to Other the ground of being, something prior to the self taken as an intending consciousness in Husserl's sense. This relationship is one of responsiveness and obligation. We might think, then, of Lévinas as providing a transcendental justification for ethics without addressing ethics in any more specific way. One can see the immediate appeal this would have for Derrida since this justification is prior to the cognitive self and the problems of epistemology, but two problems remain with his attraction to Lévinas. The first and most obvious is that it is odd that Derrida, who devoted himself to a critique of any sort of foundational claims – denounced as "the metaphysics of presence" and "logocentrism" – should now embrace a "first philosophy," and one so deeply and clearly influenced by the Biblical tradition of moral responsibility. The second, voiced most pointedly by Edward Said in the early eighties but still worth repeating, is that we look in vain to Derrida for any kind of engagement with ethics on a more mundane level, the pressing world of practical ethics.[12] While Derrida has defenders who detect implied concerns, it is hard not to conclude that there are more direct and fruitful ways to rejuvenate literary studies than by attempting to wring an ethics from deconstruction.[13]

Though not hamstrung by the radical epistemological skepticism of the deconstructionists, Foucault faced difficulties of his own in trying to demonstrate how his work might contribute to a discussion of ethics. For well over a decade Foucault had meticulously evolved a theory of "discourse." Indebted in nearly equal parts to Althusser's elaboration of the

[12] See Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 178–225. The continued relevance of Said's criticism is underscored when reading Derrida's response to the events of 9/11: "'Something' took place, we have the feeling of not having seen it coming, and certain consequences undeniably follow upon the 'thing.' But this very thing, the place and meaning of this 'event,' remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about. We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, le 11 septembre, September 11. The brevity of the appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy – a name, a number – points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about." Giovanna Borridori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 85–86.

[13] For the most sustained defense, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Lévinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

Marxian notion of ideology and to Nietzsche's grounding of all activity in the will-to-power, Foucault had posited a web of cultural practices that enmesh all who live within it as it empowers or marginalizes behavior and shapes consciousness accordingly. So helpless is the individual in the toils of discourse that, in *Les Mots et Les Choses* (1966), Foucault announced "the death of man," the end of the illusion of individual autonomy. A few years later, in his much read "What is an Author?" (1969), Foucault drew out one of the implications of his position by arguing that the very idea of an author as creative consciousness was an ideological obfuscation. In reality "the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle."[14] This stark anti-humanism has led Giddens, Lentricchia, and others to note that Foucault has, in effect, elevated Power to a metaphysical principle, with the historical record as its unfolding manifestation. Thus, it comes as a surprise, though a welcome one, to hear Foucault, toward the end of his life, urging that we consider "the axis of ethics" whose pressing question is "How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?"[15] Rightly, but no less surprisingly, he concedes, "Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection."[16] When questioned about the contradictions between his later and earlier assessments of human agency, Foucault lightheartedly claimed the right to learn and evolve. Yet, apart from the fact that his later position, because of his death, never got elaborated in the same way as the earlier position, there remained the problem that too much academic capital had been invested in the earlier Foucault by his adherents for these late pronouncements to bear much fruit, for they would first have to be acknowledged as a substantial reversal.[17]

So strong had been the influence of Derrida and Foucault that even those politically oriented schools of criticism such as New Historicism and Postcolonialism that located themselves in the vicinity of ethical conversation had to effect unhappy compromises. Stephen Greenblatt, the originator of New Historicism, relied on the historical record to situate and

[14] *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 118–19.
[15] Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment," in *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 48–49.
[16] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press), p. 284.
[17] As with Derrida, there were those who claimed that the late writing was not the reversal it seemed. See, for example, Kevin Jon Heller, "Power, Subjectification, and Resistance in Foucault," *SubStance*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1996), 78–110. The case for continuity runs up against not just Foucault's own near admission that he has changed his mind, but also the understanding of his early works by most of those who embraced discourse theory.

clarify literary texts, at times brilliantly, but then wonders whether history is not just one more fiction, a story we tell ourselves, no more valid than a myriad of alternatives.[18] He settles for a subordination of "truth" to power, following Foucault's reading of Nietzsche. Those with power will inevitably arrogate to themselves the right to tell the master narrative. It is in this way that Greenblatt justifies his own power over the texts, both literary and historical, that he interprets. But this theory sits uneasily with the ever-present tone of his readings, one that implicitly but unmistakably asks us to share his indignation at the cruelties occasioned by inequality of power. The ethical norm silently appealed to is belied by a theory according to which the most that can be said against cruelty is simply that Greenblatt doesn't happen to prefer it and has gained enough power to tell the story his way.

Postcolonialism has suffered from a similar contradiction between theory and practice, but one more pronounced since it has tended at times to take on board, along with deconstruction and Foucault, both feminism and Marxism. Gayatri Spivak, who came to prominence as the translator of Derrida's notoriously difficult prose and then emerged as a leading postcolonial critic in her own right, tries to explain, in a passage that defies paraphrase, how all this might be possible:

> Most of the interest in deconstruction has been based upon the fact that at both ends of the deconstructive morphology there is a stalling . . .The stalling at the beginning is called *différance* and the stalling at the end is called aporia. This is a focus that one can discuss in terms of the institutional space in which deconstruction has been welcome.
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> Although I acknowledge the crucial importance of these stallings at beginnings and ends, my interest is much more in the middle, which is where something like a practice emerges by way of a mistake. "Mistake" within quotes because the possibility of this mistake cannot be derived from something that is over against it, "correct." . . . Within that space, against what would you declare your own inability since there is no model where anyone is fully able to do anything. That's the declaration of interest as far as I'm concerned, it is in fact a deeply theoretical move, as there is no room there for apologizing for the limits of one's own production.[19]

In the end, like Greenblatt, though he would never be guilty of such prose, she must doubt the factuality of the very events she finds deplorable; under

[18] Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–15.
[19] Gayatri Spivak, "The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic," in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 158–59.

the influence of Foucault, she must imprison in brackets the very selves whose chains she would loosen.

Any sorting out of these conceptual muddles has encountered a further hindrance in postcolonial studies, namely the conviction that a normative ethics can only be the product of an Enlightenment ideology that posits the European as universal standard, all others as deviant. On this view, the much-vaunted Enlightenment appeal to reason was invoked merely to justify imperialistic impositions of instrumental reason. This line of thought can be traced back through Horkheimer and Adorno's notorious case in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that "Enlightenment is totalitarian"; through Heidegger's denunciation of the Cartesian cogito as licensing the technological depredations of the modern world; through Joseph de Maistre's attack on the French Revolution's Rights of Man; and ultimately to Herder's rejection of Reason as an imposition on *Volksgeist*, the unique spirit of an individual people that manifests itself in "prejudice." For most of its history, as even this quick overview makes clear, the case against the Enlightenment was the province of deeply conservative thinkers. It appealed especially to those who would deny any extra-national code of justice, as in the Dreyfus affair when Maurice Barrès insisted that Dreyfus' guilt or innocence must be determined not according to a "Kantian" notion of absolute justice, but according to "French" justice, which had as its sole criterion the welfare of the nation – and arraigned before this tribunal, Dreyfus most certainly must be condemned. (The prestige of the French army was at stake.) The difficulty with the postcolonial adoption of this stance lies not so much in the historical irony that it was typically used by those on the other end of the political spectrum to reject freedom from traditional authority, but that the postcolonial project, if it is to carry any weight, must rely on a universal view of human beings as rational moral agents who can be held to common standards. Without the assumption of an essential element of human nature, cultures would be mutually incomprehensible, a form of multiculturalism that few would relish; without the possibility of at least some supracultural norms, on what basis condemn colonialism in the first place?

Because of such inconsistencies, a rethinking of these issues eventually emerged in some quarters of postcolonial scholarship. Satya Mohanty, in his lucid and temperate *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, recognized that "postmodernism does not appear very attractive as a philosophical position or as a political perspective." Persuasively, he urges a "post-positivist realism" that would show "moral universalism and multiculturalism are compatible and indeed complementary

ideals."[20] Mohanty's acknowledgment that norms, rather than militating against multiculturalism, are necessary to protect it shows up most fruitfully in a reconfigured "cosmopolitanism." As defended by Anthony Appiah, this new cosmopolitanism would respect both the necessarily "thin" universal moral abstractions and their "thick" elaboration in different cultures.[21] Thus, respect for parents may qualify as a universal good, but find radically different ways of expressing itself, and the same with funeral customs that are meant to honor the departed. Because these practices are enmeshed in a broad set of value-laden assumptions, Appiah regards them as part of an elaborate narrative and considers encounters with such alternate narratives as beneficial in themselves. While he is not specifically concerned with literature per se, the skill in reading another culture's narrative bears obvious affinities to the imaginative expansion of self involved in engaging empathetically with fictional worlds. What, though, are we to do when we find local elaborations to be sharply at odds with the justifying principles – female circumcision as an instance of respect for women, for example – and, more troublesome, discover that these differences are not likely to be solved by reasoned argument? Appiah recognizes this as a real problem. His solution is to extol understanding of the difference as a virtue in itself: "and I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves."[22] That tends to make the trumping principle of cosmopolitanism the value of tolerantly living together, and, while it is hard not to appreciate the generosity of Appiah's view, more will need to be said about what Nussbaum refers to as "the dark side of the aspiration to community and historical rootedness."

What goes under the general rubric of feminist criticism encompasses such a number of different, and often antagonist, methodologies and theoretical assumptions that it is difficult in short space to speak definitively while still being fair to the variety. At the most basic level, however, what fuels nearly all manifestations of feminist criticism is a justified concern to point out and ultimately correct systematic patterns of unfairness in the treatment of women. In this regard, it is clearly engaged with political and ethical considerations. Sharp splits occur immediately, though, in determining what is entailed by fair treatment. Equity

[20] Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. xii.
[21] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006).
[22] Ibid., p. 85.

feminists, in the tradition of Wollstonecraft and Mill, do not question liberal, democratic principles, but argue that they have not been evenhandedly applied. Those literary critics sympathetic to this position have sought to highlight this disparity in examining the plight of female characters and the particular burdens of female authors trying to make their voices heard in a male-dominated society. Ranged against this view are those who maintain that women are sufficiently different from men that a much more radical rethinking of social practices and institutions must take place. This group itself quickly divides into those who believe the difference is natural (essentialists) and those who believe it is cultural (constructivists). Among Anglo-American feminists the essentialist position has had markedly less success than it has had on the Continent. There has been a pervasive fear, understandably inspired by the long memory of Victorian gender rigidities, that arguments based on innate differences will once again be taken as warrant for separate and unequal treatment. In addition, there has been a general failure of the essentialists to convincingly demonstrate what precisely the difference is. Attempts to argue the case for a female epistemology, the need for a different language to accommodate it (or even more modestly, the tendency to use the existing language in predictably different ways), have not been persuasive, and this weakness has acted as a further deterrent. Constructivism, then, may be seen as an attempt to argue for female particularism without committing to biological hardwiring.

Constructivism can careen to excesses of its own, certainly, as in the work of Judith Butler, who extravagantly asserts that all gender difference, aside from anatomical details, is culturally produced. The body is reduced to a pure arena of Foucauldian power intersections without prior dispositions or tendencies. Sociology consumes biology. We are left – in some unexplained way – with just enough freedom to parody these arrangements without ever being able to change them.[23] Worthier of more consideration is the constructivist claim that we should make central to morality the virtue of care, a quality deeply important to women in their cultural role as nurturers. Needs would become more important than rights; a flexible, sensitive concern would become more important than duty and its accompanying rules. In the work of both the psychologist Carol Gilligan and the philosopher Nell Noddings this ethic of care is seen as particularly consonant with female experience, maternal solicitude serving as the

[23] See Martha Nussbaum "The Professor of Parody," *The New Republic*, November 28, 2000, 37–45, for a sharp criticism of both the content and style of Butler's work.

paradigmatic scenario. Though they acknowledge that men could become full participants, virtually all their examples of care are associated with women. Building on their seminal work, Annette Baier has found mainstream precedent in the sentimental moral theory of Hume, whom she assimilates as the "women's moral theorist."[24] Others, such as Virginia Held and Joan Tronto, worried that the maternal paradigm makes of ethics something too narrowly personal and immediate, have tried to show how the ethics of care might be expanded into the public sphere.[25] Criticisms, as with any theory, have arisen: 1) that the ethics of care is crypto-essentialist; 2) that there is far less new about all this since the talk about care is merely a recasting of the virtue of benevolence; and 3) that insufficient attention has been paid to the indispensable idea of justice, too quickly dismissed as part of the male perspective. Yet, while the ethics of care may not be the radical news some of its proponents take it to be, and while it might profit from greater accommodation with deontology or especially virtue ethics, it does serve a useful function in redirecting attention toward the emotions, of crucial importance in establishing an interrelationship between literature and moral theory.

As Martha Nussbaum has argued – and it seems unfortunate that literary scholars interested in ethics did not enter earlier into conversation with her and other contemporary moral philosophers – a great deal of the ethical import of literature, indeed of the value of literature as a whole, depends on the part played by emotions in our moral lives.[26] Literature clearly does not

[24] Annette Baier, "Hume: The Women's Moral Theorist?" in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana Tatowa Meyers (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), pp. 37–55, at 37.

[25] Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Virginia Held, "Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future," in V. Held (ed.), *Justice and Care* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006), pp. 153–76; Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and "Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring?" in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, pp. 101–15.

[26] Among Nussbaum's copious writing on the topic, one might single out *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). By her own admission, a strong influence on her interest in this area was Bernard Williams. Of interest in this regard, see his "Morality and the Emotions," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 207–29, and *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). A neo-Aristotelian position at significant odds with Nussbaum's might be found in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989). Finding the modern liberal state to be a cacophony of unorchestrated self-interest, MacIntyre looks instead to a Thomistic Catholicism that has absorbed Aristotle to provide the necessary grounding authority for virtue. Rejecting the belief in original sin, upon which this view heavily relies, Nussbaum believes that Aristotle can be accommodated to secular modern society. See especially her *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).