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PART I

*The ethical unconscious*

As Bernard Williams said about the difficulties of justifying ethics in the modern world, 'there is no route back from reflectiveness'. We can try to forget the new thoughts, either individually or collectively, but in the long run there can be no stopping dissidents raising questions that are now simply 'there to be raised'.<sup>1</sup> Equally, in the past ten or fifteen years post-structuralist theory<sup>2</sup> has so changed what it is possible to think about literature that (even if one wanted it) there is no way back to the relative theoretical innocence of the 1950s or 1960s. The new insights are now simply there to be had, expressed by such words as 'essentialism', 'patriarchy', 'ideology', '*aporia*', 'referentiality' or 'hegemony'. This is why counter-attacks that have tried to deny all legitimacy to the new reflections, either by saying that the whole movement is more or less intellectually fraudulent, or philosophically mistaken, or not really new after all,<sup>3</sup> have not commanded widespread respect, for all the cogent arguments their proponents have sometimes made.

Consequently, we have not been forced to attend adequately to the uneasiness underlying intellectual resistance to post-structuralism, felt by many who otherwise accept the new, that some vital continuities with the past are in danger of being occluded. That the uneasiness continues to be expressed is a sign that, in the long run, there is no escape route from certain old thoughts either. My assumption here is that ultimately there is no evading *any* important way of thinking about ourselves deep enough to have made a permanent impress on the culture. There can only be temporary forgettings or suppressions.

The explicit and implicit case represented by this book is that the irresistible expansive moment of post-structuralism in the 1970s and early 1980s has suppressed some discursive possibilities which, constituted as we partly are by various religious and humanistic

traditions, we stand in abiding need of, and are poorer without. The possibilities I mean are evaluative, and especially ethical ones. In the past ten years, the virtual absence of explicit ethical interest in contemporary literary discourse<sup>4</sup> has been remarked on with surprise by people outside the field, notably by some eminent moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, who have themselves recently started to move into ethical literary criticism as if to fill the vacuum. Perhaps only they have had the intellectual confidence or temerity to do so, since (as I have argued elsewhere) conventional literary humanism seems so largely frozen with self-doubt.<sup>5</sup> The work of these philosophers is a significant marker, however, indicating that a point in the cultural dialectic has been reached in which literary studies can no longer ignore the ethical without yielding up a once central part of its intellectual responsibility and constituency to other disciplines. My point is not that these incursions of moral philosophy into literature necessarily pose a territorial threat, though in the short run they might; it is rather that they indicate a new road which literary studies in the end must take. It will not be, and, partly for reasons already given, cannot be, simply an old road retravelled. The great value of the recent work in literature by moral philosophers is that it offers a variety of new meta-discursive insights and possibilities from which a theoretically self-aware ethical criticism can now move out in dialectical response to post-structuralist theory, re-establishing the evaluative criticism of particular texts as an important part of what literary studies are about. This book attempts to offer an example of what such a new route might look like.

The title of this section, 'The ethical unconscious', of course alludes to Fredric Jameson's influential book, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. The point of the allusion is to suggest that post-structuralist theory has been largely unconscious of its ethical bearings, in much the same way as the older humanist criticism was often unaware of its allegiances to the interests of a particular race, social class, and gender. The suggestion of a looking-glass symmetry here is intended: just as many of the key progressive insights of the last twenty years have been about the significant political silences of the older critical mode (together with the literature it helped to canonise), so the silences of post-structuralist theory in regard to ethics have recently begun to seem ethically significant. In the past two or three years, commentators

have begun to tease out the ethical implications of genealogical and deconstructive work such as that of Foucault and de Man, which is avowedly either uninterested in substantive ethics or else altogether hostile to it. But, as political analysts have been fond of pointing out, claims to neutrality are not themselves diagnostically neutral. To adapt a well-known adage of Jameson's, everything is ethical, and our only options are to be conscious or unconscious of the fact.

But I am only mirroring Jameson up to a point. I am not saying, as he says of politics, that everything *in the last analysis* is ethical. Nor am I saying, as he says vice versa, that political discourse is necessarily false consciousness, a mode of mystifying realities that are actually ethical ones. My argument is that there is no last analysis, merely various different sorts of analysis, all of them more or less illuminating, of which ethical analysis is one and political analysis another. My theme is not, in other words, that ethical criticism should be what Richard Rorty throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* calls a 'final vocabulary' – a sort of master-narrative in terms of which all other theories and critical approaches can be definitively described, comprehended, and evaluated. The ethical criticism called Leavisism, though it distrusted theory for good reasons and resisted being called a theory, had this in common with many other theories – that its aspiration to be the master-narrative of our culture seemed often to demand that we see all alternative views as forms of false consciousness. It seems to be in the nature of theories to aspire to such comprehensiveness and rival-swallowing mastery. The so-called jungle law of eat or be eaten applies at the very loftiest theoretical altitudes – perhaps especially there, given the earthly institutional structures that usually support such enterprises.

But then competitive mutual voracity is not the only possible way in which theories can coexist. That great ever-developing, multi-sided conversation so often reified as 'the literary canon' offers much more valuable models of theoretical interaction. The various theories of culture or existence that the best imaginative literature comprehends tend to be set in dialogical interrelationship with each other, in a searching, mutually revealing exploration in which there is no final vocabulary or master-narrative. In this literature the will-to-master-narrative comes up time and again as an issue to be analysed. It is seen, among other ways, as an ethical issue – often portrayed as a manifestation of a desire to forget or to obliterate some painful or resistant aspect of reality or experience. The will, in other words, to

be in possession of ‘the last analysis’, the final vocabulary, is presented *as a form of unconsciousness*. This is a further implication of my title: imaginative literature has been a good deal preoccupied with various forms of ethical unconsciousness – and among these is a sort to which theory and theorists are especially prone.

It is for this reason, among others, that a reconceived defence of the ‘literary canon’ (understood as ever-developing and multi-vocal) is still important – despite recent evidence that it remains central in the literary curriculum of English-speaking countries such as the US and Australia.<sup>6</sup> For if this literature can be read as a probing critical commentary on the enterprise of theorising, then the theoretical moves of recent years to unseat the whole notion of canonicity take on a rather different significance. The literature ought to be regarded as theory’s resistant Other, having anticipated many of its major moves and implying compelling answers to them. For this reason, arguments in favour of decanonisation need to be scrutinised carefully, both on their own terms as well as genealogically – in terms of their will-to-power. And, above all, the arguments need to be examined without ever losing close concrete touch with literary texts. If this touch is maintained, the anti-canonical case is, as I shall suggest, considerably weakened.

## CHAPTER I

*Evaluative discourse: the return of the repressed*

On many fronts the realisation is beginning to resurface that, as Charles Taylor has expressed it, 'we all as human agents define ourselves against a background of distinctions of worth'. The force of that 'all' should not be overlooked. Some, whom Taylor calls 'naturalists', or who might otherwise be described as positivists or evaluative sceptics, do not acknowledge the point and may even explicitly deny it, but they cannot be exceptions 'just because they do not *recognize* that they are constituted by strongly evaluative self-interpretations'.<sup>1</sup> In his major recent book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Taylor does more than make the essential point that naturalist denials are everywhere contradicted by their practices. He also shows why the naturalist picture is *inherently* mistaken by showing that identity, our sense of who we are, is a kind of 'orientation in moral space'. To be without any evaluative framework at all would involve a profound psychic disorientation; such a person would not simply be morally shallow or unpredictable, he or she would be frighteningly disturbed, perhaps pathological. For a person of relative normality, the naturalist picture *cannot* obtain, simply on the grounds that such a person must be oriented in terms of the multiple evaluative distinctions needed to answer coherently for herself in everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

Taylor is not the only contemporary philosopher to argue for the inescapability of the ethical dimension, but his formulations are especially helpful in that they indicate the links between ethics and other dimensions of value. The strongly evaluative self-interpretations by which we constitute ourselves include everything in which our selfhood is expressed, including what we feel, think, and say (or do not say) about books. At this level, there is an inevitable continuity between the distinctions of worth by which we define ourselves and those by which we make judgments of value about literature.

Analogously, at the level of intellectual discourse, the arguments used to justify either ethics or scepticism towards the whole enterprise overlap with the arguments for and against the enterprise of literary evaluation. Although these are in principle distinct, and (as the example of Kant shows)<sup>3</sup> there is no reason for any given individual to conflate them, there is a marked parallelism between the two, such that ethical criticism and the literary canon (with which it is in any case interdependent) tend to share a common rise and fall of fortune.

One sign of a recent rise in the fortunes of evaluative discourse is a strengthening focus, in different disciplines, on the relative absence or loss of traditional evaluative concepts. In philosophy, for example, there have been claims that the powerful current of ethical scepticism running from Hume to C. L. Stevenson and J. L. Mackie has produced in our culture a collective loss, as well as a significant impoverishment, of ethical concepts. Two philosophers who have argued something like this are Stanley Cavell, whose book *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* has a chapter entitled 'An Absence of Morality', and Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. As Cora Diamond points out in her illuminating discussion of the two in a recent symposium in *Ethics*, both independently confront what they take to be a 'sort of conceptual amnesia'.<sup>4</sup> This image of a widespread cultural amnesia or suppression has become an extremely significant one in the last ten years. Charles Taylor, who, as we have seen, is preoccupied with naturalist denials of the ethical discriminations we all make, including naturalists themselves, talks of the need to 'fight uphill to rediscover the obvious, to counteract the layers of suppression of modern moral consciousness'.<sup>5</sup> Both Taylor and MacIntyre give genealogies of this modern suppression that go back to the Enlightenment, where strongly valued goods, such as freedom and disengaged reason, gained such authority that they have paradoxically become invisible as goods. And this is true, according to Taylor and MacIntyre, not simply of the sceptical tradition. Even Kantianism and utilitarianism, which emerge in this century as the dominant modes of moral philosophy, constrict the field to what Taylor calls 'procedural reason', which claims to be able to direct moral choice by purely rational algorithms that are themselves substantively value-neutral. These are the so-called 'foundational' or 'theoretical' modes of moral philosophy that are being rejected in many quarters today by

the ‘anti-theorists’ or ‘anti-foundationalists’ who are so important to my argument here.

In the literary field, the widespread move to theory is much more recent, and, although there are few obvious surface affinities between Kantianism or utilitarianism and post-structuralism (quite the reverse), there are some less obvious parallels that are instructive to notice. The relationship between the rise of literary theory and the fall of ethical criticism has already been well documented by Wayne C. Booth in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Particularly striking are the continuities between the ‘suppression’ Taylor talks of and Booth’s account of ethical criticism as a partly ‘Banned Discipline’, yet one in which those who would ban it none the less necessarily participate.<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of banning is what many might expect of Booth, given a well-known view of him as defensive lineman for ethical criticism. But it is a different matter when Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who is herself quite sceptical about evaluation, recently reminds us that not merely has the study of literary evaluation been neglected by literary theory, ‘the entire problematic of value and evaluation has been evaded and explicitly exiled by the literary academy’.<sup>7</sup> The terms ‘ban’ and ‘exile’ reveal quite a lot about the regal authority exercised by the collective enterprise of theory, though this is not especially new. More interesting is Smith’s word ‘evaded’, which suggests an uncomfortable reaction to something theory would rather not know about.

The idea that evaluative discourse is something that literary theory has systematically evaded is supported by the strange ‘absence of the ethical’ in literary theory pointed out by Martha Nussbaum in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Nussbaum notes that amidst literary theory’s indebtedness to such areas of philosophy as ontology, semantics, and epistemology, and despite its multitudinous references to such figures as Nietzsche and Heidegger, the work of contemporary leading 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:



But in the midst of all this busy concern with other types of philosophy, the absence of moral philosophy seems a significant sign. And in fact it signals a further striking absence: the absence, from literary theory, of the organizing 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.<sup>8</sup>

The value that Nussbaum places on 'practical' immediacy and relevance is itself an important feature of the new developments in ethics she mentions – of which her own new work is a further notable example. Beside this, the contrastingly disengaged nature of much literary theorising, its very lack of practical 'urgency', its lack of any sense that moral practice much matters, seems to Nussbaum to be a significant sign. It is a sign, in fact, that the naturalist 'suppression' of value reaches well beyond post-Enlightenment philosophy into contemporary post-structuralist theory.

A further indication that an important dialectical moment has been reached is the sudden prevalence across several discourses of a form of argument variously known as the 'self-refuting', 'self-referential' or '*ad hominem*' argument, in which the sceptic's suppressed evaluative assumptions are used to subvert his own case. The legal philosopher John Finnis, for example, argues that 'reasonableness ... requires us to reject radical [ethical] scepticism as both unjustified and literally self-refuting ...' He develops this view at length in his argument against J. L. Mackie's book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*:

when we observe that the picture or model to which Mackie implicitly appealed cannot accommodate even the simplest facts about intention, meaning and truth – facts instantiated by every one of his assertions – we are entitled to conclude that his talk about queerness and special faculties in relation to our judgments about the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, fails to give any reason for doubt about the objectivity or truth of such judgments.<sup>9</sup>

With his belief in 'facts' about intention, meaning, and truth and the 'objectivity' of judgments, Finnis is very far from the more modish perspectivalism of Richard Rorty, and yet his case against Mackie is characteristic of the sort of argument used so often against evaluative scepticism in the 1980s. It is in one respect a kind of deconstruction:

Finnis is pointing to the destabilising absence or *aporia* in Mackie's argument, his repressed assumptions about intention, meaning, and truth, which ultimately undo the logic of his position. The interesting thing is that this sort of deconstruction is performed by philosophers who otherwise have no surface affinities with post-structuralism: the argument is now suddenly 'there' to be made. Bernard Williams himself deconstructs the ethical assumptions presupposed both by sceptics and by moral foundationalists such as Kant: 'We are interested in the idea that ethical considerations are presupposed by rational freedom, and this will have to mean a freedom to which the moral skeptic, among others, is *already* committed.'<sup>10</sup> That emphasis on 'already' might have come from Paul de Man or Barbara Johnson.

The fact that such arguments can be called deconstructive suggests that this is a dialectical movement and not simply a rather broadly based reactionary counter-attack: inherent logical fissures within naturalist post-Enlightenment philosophy and literary theory now seem wide open to analysis. Similar arguments are 'there' to be made within literary theory against both positivist and post-Saussurean forms of evaluative scepticism. A much discussed case of the former is that of John Carey's commentary in the *TLS* of 22 February 1980, entitled 'An end to evaluation'. Carey argues that the age of literary value-judgments has passed, that judgments were once thought to be objective and values part of the nature of things, but are now seen by the enlightened as merely subjective: the judgments we make merely tell us about ourselves and not about the world. The 'modern' cosmology on which this account of value depends is given to us explicitly by Carey:

But how can such values retain their credibility in the godless universe which most people now inhabit? Modern man is quite used to the idea that we are the temporary occupants of a cooling solar system; that human life is an accident of chemistry; that all the ages, from the first dawn on earth to its extinction, will amount to no more than a brief parenthesis in the endless night of space; that good and evil and other such ephemera were created by the human mind in its attempt to impose some significance on the amoral flux which constitutes reality.<sup>11</sup>

Wayne Booth and Raymond Tallis have both made the point that Carey's theory here is undermined by his own critical practice elsewhere, which (necessarily) embodies both explicit and implicit