Introduction

Most recent studies of the ethics and politics of literary theory focus on the polemical issues of literary value, multiculturalism, or canons.[1] The assumption of this book is that these questions cannot be fruitfully posed until we examine the theoretical commitments that drive discussions of textual politics. The commitments that I will address concern the relationships among language, subjectivity, and ethics. The influence of these commitments in contemporary debate can be seen in two assumptions made by most literary theory: (1) since any positive theory of the good life (good book) is necessarily ethnocentric, we should concern ourselves only with the political values of justice and negative freedom (freedom from social structures); (2) since the subject is a decentered site where social and linguistic forces converge, there can be no constructing ethical subject but only a constructed political subject. This is, of course, a simplification of the many positions I will examine in detail, but it captures enough of the problem for me to put the goals of this book on the table right away: to show how theory has boxed us into these unproductive positions and then to develop a way around the double impasse so that we can enrich the way we theorize textual value and read literary works. We do not need to decide what the canon is or what a good book is but rather to understand what is crippling our critical dialogue and how to find the resources to improve it.

The ethical/political dilemmas of literary theory can be seen in a conference on liberal education at the University of North Carolina. In one camp, there are conservatives, such as Allan Bloom, Lynne Cheney, and William Bennett, who attack the diversification of the curriculum because it ignores the need for ''common ground,''

---

[1] The bibliography on canons and value is staggering. My concern is with the philosophical vocabulary in which value is theorized rather than with canon formation.

1

because it politicizes aesthetic issues, or because it leads to relativism. In the other camp, are those who form what Henry Louis Gates calls the "cultural Left" – that is, "that uneasy, shifting set of alliances formed by feminist critics, critics of so-called 'minority' discourse, and Marxist and poststructuralist critics generally, the Rainbow Coalition of contemporary critical theory" ("The Master's Pieces," p. 95).[2] The conservatives' attacks on the canon and the so-called "politicization" of the humanities make easy targets for the "cultural Left," which can point to examples of oppression and exclusion or to the inevitable political dimension in educational issues; however, the cultural Left's apparent unity masks its failure to address the question of what positive norms or guidelines should inform deliberation about education. This question brings out the emptiness of the word "Left" here, since it puts Stanley Fish with Michel Foucault. This vacuous alliance is made possible only by manifestly antidemocratic agendas, such as Bloom's and Bennett's. These agendas permit everyone to subscribe to different forms of a hermeneutics of suspicion that merely attack previous theories of cultural value with an unsituated appeal to justice and difference. A brief look at the remarks of three members of this Rainbow Coalition at the conference – Stanley Fish, Henry Louis Gates, and Gerald Graff – will highlight these problems.

In "The Common Touch, or, One Size Fits All," Fish shows how conservatives have made a fundamental epistemological error, not just a political one. Fish's essay aims to explode the myth of the common ground and shows how it is a "contested category": "Difference cannot be managed by measuring it against the common because the shape of the common is itself differential" (p. 247). Hence, he can point out that Lynne Cheney's writings result in "the marginalization and suppression of other traditions," that they "would arrest the play of democratic forces in order to reify as transcendent a particular and uncommon stage of cultural history" (p. 260). However, he never describes what political deliberation will look like once we have accepted this truth; instead, he leaves us with the dangerous platitude that everything is political: "Politics can neither be avoided nor embraced . . . [T]he political – the inescapability of partisan, angled seeing – is what

---

[2] There are other positions in this collection that do not fit this schema, such as Richard Rorty's "Two Cheers for the Cultural Left."

Introduction

always already grasps us'' (p. 249). He ends his essay not with democratic norms or guidelines but with a generalization about the production of values, a generalization that offers no ethical or political direction: ''If values and standards are themselves historical products, fashioned and refashioned in the crucible of discussion and debate, there is no danger of their being subverted because they are always already being transformed'' (p. 265). Fish describes the conditions that must inform any particular view of ethics, politics, and the self, but he never moves from this point to propose such a theory or to defend a positive agenda of his own.

In ''The Master's Pieces,'' Gates revolts against a theory of difference that cuts through all identities. He does so not because he disagrees with the attack on conservatives but because he wants to talk about the constitution and achievements of individuals and communities and not just tell stories of oppression or mistaken epistemologies. It is not surprising that those who do not simply write about oppression but who are forced to live in communities whose ethical substance exiles them are not content only with an ethics/politics of negative liberty and difference. They know that only a rich axiology of existence, and not justice alone, can nourish them. As Cornel West says, ''Those theories that try to take the place of wisdom disempower people on existential matters, just as those wisdoms that try to shun theory usually subordinate people to the political powers that be'' (*The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, pp. xxvii–xxviii). Hence, Gates does not flinch from offering an alternative position and rejecting strictures imposed by a deconstructive view of difference on identity for African Americans:

> The classic critique of our attempts to reconstitute our own subjectivity, as women, as blacks, etc., is that of Jacques Derrida.
> ''This is the risk. The effect of Law is to build a structure of the subject, and as soon as you say, 'well, the woman is a subject and this subject deserves equal rights,' and so on -- then you are caught in the logic of phallocentrism and you have rebuilt the empire of Law.'' To expressions such as this, made by a critic whose stand on sexism and racism has been exemplary, we must respond that the Western male subject has long been constituted historically for himself and in himself. And, while we readily accept, acknowledge, and partake of the critique of this subject as transcendent, to deny us the process of exploring and reclaiming our

3

subjectivity before we critique it is the critical version of the grandfather clause, the double privileging of the categories that happen to be preconstituted.   ("The Master's Pieces," p. 111)

Gates rightly claims that Derrida's theory of language cannot articulate satisfactorily the importance of agency and tradition in African American literature; however, instead of making a direct theoretical challenge to Derrida or making a meta-theoretical move that places Derrida's accounts of identity and history as one theoretical option within a broad hermeneutic space – which is the direction I will pursue in chapter 1 – he says Derrida's strictures do not apply to African American literature for political reasons. By simply walking away from the theoretical problem and pursuing a "vernacular criticism," in which the African American tradition is analyzed in isolation with its own critical language, Gates adopts an incoherent theoretical position and a flawed ethical/political one. First, his view remains vulnerable to a deconstructive critique, such as the one Barbara Johnson makes. She rightly claims that Gates "posit[s] the existence of pure, unified, and separate traditions, and spatializes the concept of identity" ("Response to Henry Louis Gates," p. 42).[3] This oscillation between deconstructing and essentializing is a familiar and vicious circle in contemporary theory that is produced precisely by the poststructuralist assumption that any account of the agent's self-constitutions is a humanist essentialism, an essentialism that ignores two of the presuppositions of contemporary cultural criticism, the decentered subject and the oppressiveness of ethical traditions.[4] Gates needs to take on both points: not all theories and practices of agency are essentialist; not all ethical traditions are so oppressive as to be incapable of recuperation. A satisfactory response to Johnson would provide a hermeneutics that could assess the different traditions that inform African American cultural identities and that could show how they enable and/or oppress. In characterizing the American/European traditions only in terms of domination, he does not account for the positive potential that African American writers have found in them or for the complex ways in which oppression

[3] Johnson's "Response" is to Gates's "Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition," which is nearly identical to the Gates essay published in *The Politics of Liberal Education*.
[4] See Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking* for an account of these oscillations that unfortunately continues rather than ends them. I discuss her work in chapter 1.

4

Introduction

works through internalization inside the texts themselves. Gates goes further than Fish, because he (Gates) does not simply unmask theories of tradition and affirm difference but actually goes on to characterize one kind of difference. Nonetheless, he still lets the tradition and the theories that sustain and critique it off too easily.

Gerald Graff's essay "Teach the Conflicts" pushes the arguments of Fish and Gates one step further since Graff does not just appeal to the truth and goodness of difference but proposes a way for thematizing alternative views of the true and the good. Graff shows how we need to get beyond poking holes in conservative proposals and "to concede that the curriculum is badly in need of coherence, but to reject its prescription for supplying that coherence. Instead of trying to superimpose coherence from above, we should try to locate a principle of coherence in the conversation itself in all its contentiousness" (pp. 50–60). Yet, Graff does not discuss the place from which we understand this conflict; his essay insists that we confront the familiar liberal dilemma of how a society should cope with the competing views of the good held by its members, but he does not offer new norms or other guidelines that would get us beyond liberalism's purported neutrality.[5] Instead of enriching the context of deliberation, he simply insists that conflicts be presented. However, Fish catches Graff's evasion in his critique of those on the Left who try to reconcile a theory of decentered difference with a positive agenda. "Each [those who, like Graff, propose teaching the conflicts and those who, like Betty Jean Craige, propose tolerance] fails to see that conflict and tolerance cannot be privileged – made into platforms from which one can confidently and unpolitically speak – without turning them into the kind of normative and transcendental standards to which they are constantly opposed" ("The Common Touch," p. 248). Fish tacks on "transcendental" to "normative," as if the two were necessarily linked. Norms do not need transcendental support. If

[5] Ronald Dworkin formulates liberalism's fundamental thesis with regard to the good life as follows: "Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions [of the good] the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception of the good life or of what gives value to life" ("Liberalism," p. 64). When literary theorists employ the word "liberal," they usually refer to Matthew Arnold or Wayne Booth – if they drop a footnote at all – and not to contemporary political theorists. In political theory, the values of liberal democracy are not conservative museum pieces untouched by poststructuralist or Marxist theory. See William Connolly's Foucaultian liberalism in *The Politics and Ambiguity* and *Identity and Difference* or Habermas's recuperation of the Enlightenment.

5

the Enlightenment's democratic revolution linked the foundational-
ist epistemological project with its political ideals, many philosophers
now separate them.[6]

This separation means that strategies seeking merely to "de-
stabilize," "undo," and "subvert" are inadequate, since this
rhetoric of undirected change is justified only in the presence of
something so awful that anything else is preferable; instead, these
ideals can be criticized and renewed. Any theory of critique
implies a theory of recuperation that makes that critique possible.
What this means is that the Left will have to give up using only the
vocabulary of power to characterize liberal democratic traditions,
a vocabulary that justifies the quest for a revolution so radical that
it is inconceivable. As Chantal Mouffe says, "The objective of the
Left should be the extension and deepening of the democratic
revolution initiated two hundred years ago" (*Radical Democracy*, p.
1).[7] Without a hermeneutics of recuperation that can reconstruct
and valorize textual practices, a politics of difference threatens to
become an indiscriminate appeal to diversity, a utopian projection
that provides no language for discussing the identities and
traditions of the oppressed or the dominant culture(s). It is
precisely this need for positive norms that conservatives recognize,
even if they come up with inadequate ways to fill it. Hence, both
defenders and critics of the canon fall into what Amy Gutmann
calls the false opposition of "give them liberty or give them virtue"
("Undemocratic Education," p. 75). As she says, "Cultivating
character and intellect through education constrains children's
future choices, but it does not uniquely determine . . . The question
is not whether to maximize freedom or to inculcate virtue, but how
to combine freedom and virtue" (p. 75).

What accompanies this particular ethical/political configuration
in literary theory is the disappearance of agency, the absence of a
theory of the constructing, as well as of the constructed, subject. In
the poststructuralist paradigm, the "subject" becomes simply an

---

[6] See Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* and Richard Rorty's
Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.
[7] Mouffe clarifies her proposal as follows: "For those who refuse to see 'really
existing' liberal democratic capitalism as the 'end of history,' radical democracy
is the only alternative . . . Such a perspective does not imply the rejection of liberal
democracy and its replacement by a completely new political form of society, as
the traditional idea of revolution entailed, but a radicalization of the modern
democratic revolution" (*Radical Democracy*, p. 1.)

Introduction

effect of forces working behind the back of the agent. We do not find theories of the subject's ethical constitution, commitments, or capacities but theories that display a self-consciousness for which they never account. In a world composed only of impersonal forces rather than agents and values, hermeneutics and ethics disappear in favor of political accounts of these forces and their effects. However, theorists who offer accounts of only a constructed subject avoid the hermeneutic circle by ignoring the agency of their own speech acts. This is not to say that poststructuralism's important critiques of humanistic views of subjectivity and value should be dismissed. Instead, they need to be accommodated as much as possible within a new space for hermeneutical and ethical reflection and serve as an ethical/political challenge to any closing of the hermeneutic circle. But where can we find theories that affirm agency and discuss the problem of articulating conflicting ethical goods?

When I began reading the works of ethical/political theorists such as Michael Sandel, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Taylor, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Iris Young, Cornel West, and Alasdair MacIntyre,[8] I noticed a concern for a host of issues about ethics/politics and identity that were important to literary theory but ignored within it, as Nussbaum and others note.[9] Since many of the theorists listed above have also addressed poststructuralist and Marxist critiques that inform literary theory, the question is why literary theory has ignored these debates. Among the many reasons, the most prominent is no doubt the one that Nussbaum offers when she says that literary critics are "constrained by the pressure of the current thought that to discuss a text's ethical and social content is somehow to neglect 'textuality,' the complex relationships of that text with other texts" (*Love's Knowledge*, p. 170). The Anglo-American philosophical tradition does not formulate its ethical/political concerns with linguistic terminology drawn from the structuralism and poststructuralism that currently dominate literary theory, and this abstention – combined with poststructuralist assumptions about the subject and ethical traditions

[8] See, for example, Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Taylor's "What's Wrong with Negative Freedom?," Benhabib's *Situating the Self*, MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, West's *Keeping Faith*, and Fraser's *Unruly Practices*.
[9] See "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," *Love's Knowledge*. Unfortunately, Nussbaum speaks exclusively of Anglo-American ethical theory rather than Continental philosophy.

7

– has created the unfortunate assumption in literary theory that the only way to connect language to ethics is in the poststructuralist manner.[10]

Hence, the need for a new philosophy of language is directly related to the ontological problems of ethics and agency, since the ontologies offered by contemporary theory are linguistic. What Richard Rorty dubbed "the linguistic turn" many years ago is more accurately characterized as the "ontological turn,"[11] in which both the Continental heritage of Heidegger and the Anglo-American heritage of Wittgenstein offer competing views of the relationship of language and subjectivity. These debates point to the need for a meta-theoretical dimension, in which we can assess these alternative views in light of our theoretical needs. Moreover, they show the need to integrate ethics – or more broadly, axiology – into linguistic theory.

A good way to get hold of how language, ethics, and the self are connected is to think about the conflicts in daily life between understanding someone as an agent (what I will call a first-/second-person account) and understanding him or her as a constructed subject (what I will call a third-person account). In first-person accounts, we seek to articulate the subject's intentions, background assumptions, and the vocabularies used to constitute personal or community identities. In third-person accounts, we redescribe the subject's language or action in terms that do not respect the integrity of the subject's self-constitution. In first-/second-person accounts, we think of ourselves as agents; in third-person accounts, we redescribe ourselves as others with terms that cut across the

[10] Nussbaum makes no effort to join textual theories and ethical theory – which is at the heart of my book – and this explains why literary theorists do not have much dialogue with her or the ethical tradition she defends. Instead, she aims her work to Anglo-American ethical philosophers, urging them to consider her neo-Aristotelianism and her appropriation of literature. Anglo-American attempts to link language and ethics in the 1950s, such as the work of R.M. Hare and C.L. Stevenson, were narrow investigations of usage that have been largely abandoned and that perhaps have led philosophers to stay away from the linguistic dimension of ethics. See Bernard Williams, "The Linguistic Turn," chapter 7 in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* for an account as well as Alasdair MacIntyre's critique in chapter 2 of *After Virtue*. I think such a dialogue is both possible and important. I discuss Nussbaum's work in chapter 4 after I have connected language and ethics in a way that is compatible with her work.

[11] *The Linguistic Turn*. I discuss the "ontological turn" in chapter 2 and in "The Ontological Turn and Its Ethical Consequences: Habermas and the Poststructuralists." For an excellent philosophical exposition of the character of agency from a Wittgensteinian perspective, see Charles Altieri's *Subjective Agency*.

8

Introduction

action vocabulary of the agent so that the agent's vocabulary is determined by forces of which he/she is unaware. For example, we could redescribe a person's virtuous self-description in terms of a psychological mechanism – guilt, masochism – or in terms of an economic/social system – capitalism's ethic of consumption. We employ both of these modes in everyday conversation. With our friends, we are attentive to the language of self-constitution, but we also need to be aware of the patterns that operate "behind our friends' backs" and that help deepen our understanding – for example, the cyclical ways someone talks about her mother. Sometimes we will challenge our friends' language of constitution – for example, when we cannot endure the way they are hurting us or themselves. In this case, we will suggest a third-person description directly or indirectly: "I think you need to ask yourself why you keep falling in love with people who mistreat you?" Or, "In other words, what (third-person) forces are pushing you?" If we are in pain, we sometimes pay to have our language of constitution challenged by a therapist, whose job is to help us integrate the forces working behind our backs into our first-person accounts of ourselves. Third-person accounts often make unflattering redescriptions of our ethical self-understandings; however, these accounts are not views from nowhere; they ultimately appeal to a revised ethical self-understanding in which we can live.

If we often move back and forth between thinking of the subject as constructing and constructed in everyday life, we do not do so in critical theory. One reason is that the pains that interest critical theory are not usually accessible to dialogue with friends or therapists. These pains, such as the domination of women or the alienation of people from their work, require social change for them to be relieved. Moreover, the complex linguistic, social, and economic forces that produce pain cannot be grasped and laid out in front of us; rather, they are so pervasive that they do not just impinge on persons but constitute them. That is, the first-person accounts people give of their own actions employ ideas and languages that are complicitous with their own oppression and hence are epistemologically and ethically misguided. According to the assumptions of much critical theory, people do not have the autonomy they ascribe to themselves; moreover, the ethical ideas that inform their self-interpretations are better described as systems of power. Theorists, unlike therapists, do not have a dialogue with

9

these ''persons''; theorists speak about not to these subjects. The dialogue is only with like-minded readers.

While there is little doubt about the importance of these third-person critiques, the theorists doing (and reading about) the unmasking account for neither their own agency nor the ethical resources that they use to make their critiques. If oppression is airtight, and if the ethical resources of the West are so bankrupt, how does the speaker get free, and where did he/she find an untainted language of justice and freedom in which to make an appeal? My point is not just to demonstrate a logical contradiction in these readings. Rather, I want to insist on the need to develop accounts of the constructing subject that can dialogue with accounts of the constructed subject. This project also requires a recuperation of our ethical resources that can respond to third-person stories that reduce ethics to power. I use the word ''dialogue'' because first-/second- and third-person accounts need to confront each other continually. We are both constructing and constructed subjects, and our deliberations need to be informed by both vocabularies. All unmaskings of our agency and our values are addressed by someone to someone (even if this is a future ''someone'') for some reason. That is, even the most anti-hermeneutical accounts, such as Foucault's or Derrida's, are appeals for a new kind of hermeneutics that avoids difficulties in the old ones.

Chapter 1 begins with the historical background to the contemporary arguments between third-person and first-/second-person perspectives, and I start with Kant's two realms and Hegel's critique of Kant before exploring latter reformulations from Marx to Heidegger and Gadamer. This exposition sets up my examination of the axiological and ontological assumptions that inform the work of Derrida, Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Edward Said, Judith Butler, and Fredric Jameson. My critical assessment of their work is done through the problematic of explanation and understanding, which is the philosophical background to the story of first/second-person (understanding) and third-person (explanation) I told above. I focus on two issues. The first is how a concern with domination eliminates ethics and agency. While Jameson and the poststructuralists think that our culture has become so deeply flawed that we cannot imagine an alternative, Habermas limits his conception of ethics and agency

10