Edited by
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THE ETHICS IN LITERATURE

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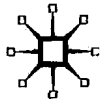

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Contents

Introduction: Literature and the Return to Ethics

Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods

Steven Connor has recently commented on the current ubiquity of ethical debates in literary studies: 'The word "ethics" seems to have replaced "textuality" as the most charged term in the vocabulary of contemporary literary and cultural theory.'[1] A careful search through the catalogues of academic publishers, along the shelves of contemporary journals in humanities' libraries, or through the review pages of broadsheet newspapers and supplements will reveal the force of Connor's observation. What is the reason for the obsessive attention paid to the question of morality? Is it just another passing intellectual fad?

One reason which might be put forward is the general discontent with what some have perceived to be the arid formalism which came to dominate the humanities throughout Europe and America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Structuralism, Poststructuralism and then Postmodernism were intellectual movements with which everyone with any intellectual pretensions at all was often compelled to grapple. Battle lines were drawn up early in Britain between those who demanded a rigorous linguistically-based analysis of the text, often involving a vocabulary which non-initiates found bemusing, and more traditional humanists who insisted that literature should be about real life (whatever that might be). There were a number of significant flashpoints. A minor tremor occurred when a young English lecturer at the University of Cambridge, Dr Colin McCabe, did not have his temporary contract renewed, a decision, so his supporters alleged, motivated by the arrogant contempt of a conservative institution for an adherent of intellectual approaches the significance of which they refused to countenance. A much more significant event took place when the researches of an even younger Belgian postgraduate, Ortwin de Graef (one of the contributors to this volume), unearthed the

wartime journalism of Paul de Man, one of the most high-profile champions of poststructuralist theory in North America, and exposed the recently deceased professor as a sympathiser with Nazi doctrines in his early years. A colossal amount of ink was spilt immediately afterwards as academics and journalists lined up on opposite sides.[2] Some suggested that de Man's early writings expressed the logical conclusion of what they claimed was, in essence, a right-wing ideology; others, that de Man's later writings were a powerful renunciation and correction of his youthful excesses and errors.

This crude caricature of complex debates is important in assessing the current significance of ethical thought in the humanities and literary criticism in particular. Some might argue that ethics has resurfaced because to deny the need for making value judgements when dealing with human interaction is a naive mistake, one which the purveyors of abstract ideas were too arrogant to recognise. Indeed, many in Britain and America would point to the strange coincidence that the rise of 'theory' in the academy took place at the same time as national politics moved sharply to the right under the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. For such commentators, Marxists and liberal humanists alike, we are now returning to a period of (relative) sanity, after a methodological and political disaster epitomised by outrageous statements such as Michel Foucault's famous assertion that the epoch of 'man' was about to come to a close.[3]

However, this brief history hides as much as it reveals. Although ethical debate may have been somewhat unfashionable and underrepresented, it never actually disappeared from poststructuralist discourse; at least, not from the writings of its most subtle and brilliant exponents. A watershed occurred in 1985, when Henry Louis Gates, Jr, printed a translation of Jacques Derrida's *Le dernier mot du racisme* ('Racism's Last Word'), as part of a special issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry*, later reprinted as the influential volume, *'Race', Writing, and Difference*.[4] Derrida's essay had originally been published for the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition collected together by the association of Artists of the World against Apartheid, opening in Paris in November 1983.

The essay drew a rather sharp critical response from two postgraduate students at Columbia University, Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon (now both established and prominent academics). While not doubting 'his commitment to change in South Africa',

both questioned 'the strength of Derrida's method' to unravel the historical and political factors which constituted the notion of 'apartheid'.[5] Derrida responded with an excoriating attack, a complete departure from his established, urbane style of argument, which made it clear that the question of his philosophy's ability to deal with the problem of apartheid was as much an ethical as an historical one. Derrida's response demands to be read in full by anyone wishing to intervene in the debate about the political and ethical efficacy of deconstruction, but a sample of his writing gives some idea of the issues he felt were at stake in the exchange:

> Your [McClintock and Nixon's] 'response' is typical. It reflects an incomprehension or 'misreading' that is widespread, and spread about, moreover, for very determined ends, on the 'Left' and the 'Right' among those who think they represent militantism and a progressivist commitment .... On one side and the other, people get impatient when they see that deconstructive practices are also and first of all political and institutional practices. They get impatient when they see that these practices are perhaps more radical and certainly less stereotyped than others, less easy to decipher, less in keeping with well-used models whose wear and tear ends up letting one see the abstraction, the conventionalism, the academicism, and everything that separates ... words and history.[6]

Derrida's irate letter, in which he makes it clear that McClintock and Nixon's attack is not the first he has had to suffer, defends deconstruction and its attempt to undermine the certainties of Western metaphysics, as an ethical and political practice, one which may question the validity of 'man' and 'humanism', but ultimately seeks to re-enfranchise a larger public by giving individuals the power to cast off the chains of intellectual oppression.[7] His defence of deconstruction, as an ethically and politically sensitive 'method', centres upon the concept of 'patience'. Derrida argues that the easy assumption of commitment and apparently laudable attitudes is, all too often, unethical behaviour because such identity politics serve only to obscure the real issues – in this case Derrida's nuanced exploration of the ways in which strong stances against apartheid served to disguise and obscure racism nearer home, a biting irony given apartheid's European origins. Derrida's plea is for what might be termed 'an ethics of reading', a 'method' which refuses

easy solutions in order to tease out the significance and implications of the text. Similarly, when Roland Barthes's later essays on reading and writing practices (especially of comprehending the visible and audible) were published, it was under the title *The Responsibility of Forms*. In this case, 'responsibility' appears to be closely linked to scrupulous attention to the formal inscription of structures and signs in the textual work of writers, musicians, painters and designers.[8]

It has not been our desire in compiling the chapters for this book to participate directly in any such debate, merely to point out the central relevance of ethical concerns in literary criticism and philosophy and to illustrate that the current upsurge of interest in ethics is not a phenomenon which has appeared from nowhere. Clearly, a hostile critic of Derrida could respond with the logic of the 'yes, but ...'. Scrupulous reading is something to be valued as Derrida argues, but careful weighting of all possibilities can serve as a substitute rather than a call for action, enabling the would-be ethical subject to hide behind convenient intellectual barriers (a charge Marxist critics have often levelled against Derrida and what they saw as his refusal to nail his colours to the mast).[9] Instead, the purpose of *The Ethics in Literature* is to interrogate and juxtapose precisely such divergent approaches to ethical questions in order to give the reader the means to participate in current debates and take a stand themselves should they so wish.

The chapters which follow reveal a variety of approaches to ethical questions: from ones that are based on careful reading of texts, notably Ruth Kolani's plea for the use of stylistics as a means of decoding behaviour and determining its moral significance, to more directly focused political approaches, as in the essays of Andrew Hadfield and Ortwin de Graef. Some draw attention to the problems of certain ethical approaches; for example, Rebecca Hughes and Kieron O'Hara suggest that Kant's perception of individuals as responsible moral agents is challenged by a short story such as John Cheever's *The Swimmer*, which shows how human beings are all too often trapped by their personalities and histories, preventing them from acting autonomously. A similar case is made by Cristina Mejía, who reads E. M. Forster's novel, *Howards End*, in order to challenge Richard Rorty's assumption that in attributing specifically human capacities to individuals one is committing a form of critical and interpretative violence. On the contrary, Mejía argues, using Margaret Schlegel's agonised rejection of the sensitive

Leonard Bast as an illustration, human beings act from a complex panoply of emotions and social constraints which can be described if one adopts a 'thicker' conception of ethics and moral agency than is allowed for in Rorty's philosophy.

Other chapters suggest that specific ethical terms have been neglected by philosophers, and that they deserve serious reconsideration. A case in point is Andrew Gibson's attempt to reclaim an understanding of 'sensibility' as central to our moral concerns through the reading of Jean Rhys and Anaïs Nin. Gibson argues that the ethical principles which these authors explore are similar to Emmanuel Levinas's conception of sensibility. Levinas construes sensibility as akin to vulnerability, an equation which disrupts the patriarchal hierarchy inscribed by the 'tyranny of an established reality', and points the way towards a feminist ethics. A related case is made in Janis Caldwell's argument that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* points out the need for nineteenth-century science to accommodate principles of sympathy within its analytic rigour, and in Susan Rowland's 'hysterical' reading of Michèle Roberts's novel *In the Red Kitchen*, whereby the reader refuses to privilege the (masculine) voice of reason and sanity and responds to the otherness of the individual female voice.

Feminism has arguably held the ethical high ground during all these often vitriolic arguments between Marxists and poststructuralists. Attempting to reorientate society towards a politics of everyday life, breaking down one of the most virulent hierarchies in our society, and fostering a *societas* based upon equality, feminists have sought to inculcate a new ethical consciousness of social justice. The notion that women are more moral than men has been around for decades, based upon such patriarchal narratives of moral fantasy as an 'Angel in the House', or the 'Earth-Mother'. Nevertheless, much feminist argument continues to present the willingness to nurture and a ready capacity for emotional involvement as being essential to a humane moral stance in a world of injustice and alienation. Indeed, an 'ethics of care' forms one of the central planks of feminist debates about alternative social practices, founded upon receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness as opposed to 'masculine' ethical preoccupations with property-rights, equality and duty. Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin have argued that while feminist ethics is not blind to the necessity of reinterpreting the moral significance of women as 'care-givers', it has maintained a commitment to the

alternative ethical perspective provided by non-masculine experience. According to their book *Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice*, the debate over the past ten years has hinged on three principal issues:

(1) whether an ethic that stresses the centrality of *care* can be developed into a coherent, persuasive and politically defensible feminist ethic;
(2) whether *justice* as defined within classical liberal political frameworks can maintain its hitherto orthodox hegemonic role when one is working within a feminist ethical context; and
(3) whether a relational ethic which attaches such importance to personal intimate bonds between people, can be utilised within larger, more impersonal situations.[10]

Based upon the politicisation of the personal, feminist ethics attempts to break down the long held boundaries between public and private morality which have reinforced the power of those privileged few. Together with Habermasian notions of ethical goodness in public debate and argumentation, and postcolonial critiques of the racial constituency of capitalist western societies, this reconfiguration of the public sphere has led to new discussions about what constitutes an ethics within the context of debates about individuals' relations to the state and national identity. Ortwin de Graef's contribution is relevant here, insofar as it attempts to consider the relationship of the individual to the state in *Coriolanus*, and how this may suggest an ethical repositioning of Kant's ideas of freedom and independence. In focusing on the metaphor of the 'body politic', de Graef suggests that it is constituted by catachresis: 'Coriolanus must be *declared* – not just recognised but quite literally *made* – a representative of the people *because* he already is just that .... Thus, the impact of the people's voice is precisely nothing, yet unless this nothing is performed, the body politic is revealed as a monstrosity'. Acknowledging that political debate is a vital public ritual and a significant symbolic procedure in 'democratic' states, de Graef questions whether it is not monstrous that such political rhetoric can constitute a state, lacking any material constitution.

Andrew Hadfield's focus on the complex politics of Israel and of Jewish national identity in Saul Bellow's writing draws attention to the ethical debate concerning ethnic and racial identities. Any discussion of ethnicity and national identity is always also by

implication a discussion of ethics. Hadfield argues that Bellow's sophisticated conception of the individual victim is ultimately vitiated by his myopic and simplistic treatment of nationhood: 'The Saul Bellow of *To Jerusalem and Back* appears to want to pose as a victim by dint of his race, without actually having borne the marks of experience, a position he carefully refused to validate in the earlier novel [*The Victim*].' The Jewish right to self-determination has often been obscured by theological and cultural arguments about racial differences. Indeed, as has been widely discussed, even Emmanuel Levinas appears to have based much of his ethical phenomenology on a correction of Graeco-Romanic Christian metaphysics by a more Semitic metaphysics.[11] This reorientation of Christian thought was designed to establish an ethics which countered the Protestant Christianity of Heidegger's national socialist sympathies and his ontological existentialism, the indiscriminate 'ethics' which resulted in Auschwitz and the Nazi atrocities.

The racial struggles to determine distinct national identities which have marked the second half of the twentieth century (in Israel, South Africa, West and East Africa, Ireland, Bosnia, Central Asia, North Africa, Central America, and elsewhere) have posed some of the century's most difficult ethical questions. Postcolonial criticism and the burgeoning influence of ethnic studies has directed new attention to the situation of oppressed and marginalised elements of our society and culture; attempting to foster some interracial dialogue without the imposition of a uni-racial perspective, postcolonial criticism strives for a new ethical consciousness of race and ethnicity. One might call this the 'ethics of the exile', the ethical outlook offered by the perspective of the exiled consciousness. Many postcolonial theorists of ethnicity take firm ethical stands with their central concepts: Spivak's 'subaltern theory', Bhabha's 'hybridity', Said's 'orientalism' to name but a few. Public space can no longer (if it ever was) be construed as an 'ethics free zone'.

Indeed, a major concern which the contributors to this volume share is to open out debates on the subject of ethics so that it does not remain as a compartmentalised branch of the discipline of philosophy. Hence there are a number of chapters included which argue the importance of literary texts and literary methods in establishing the importance of bridging the gap between philosophy and representations of ethical behaviour. In addition to Gibson, Rowland, Mejía and Hughes and O'Hara, one can point to