

Introduction: Ethics of the Narrative

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If a man could write a book on Ethics which really
was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an
explosion, destroy all the other books in the world. ¹

The debate on whether literature does or should possess ethical relevance is both old and new. As far back as in the ancient times, Plato and Aristotle addressed the ways in which aesthetic structure produces affective power, as well as the extent to which the affective power of literature may provide direction, or in fact—as in the case of Plato’s famous critique of poetry—misdirection to an audience’s moral consciousness. In more recent years, in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the intersections of literature and ethics became the focus of work by Wayne C. Booth,² who theorized on the moral functioning of rhetorical practices, and Martha C. Nussbaum,³ who addressed literature from the perspective of moral philosophy. In an article published in the 2004 special issue of *Poetics Today*, which focused on Ethics and Literature, Michael Eskin⁴ draws attention to moral philosophy’s “turn to literature,” a move that aims to embed moral philosophy’s abstract investigations into the concrete domain of human and social relations opened up by literature. At the same time, however, philosophy’s turn toward literature has coincided with a turn of literary studies toward ethics,⁵ a fact which some attribute to a reaction against formalism and poststructuralism.

During the 1970s and 1980s, discussions of literary texts were generally geared toward the semiotic aspects of language, the multivalent fluidity of discourse, or toward narrative politics, with focus on constructions of race, gender, class and ethnicity. So, when Wayne Booth published *The Company We Keep* (1988), in which he called for restoration of ethical criticism, his was rather a lone voice in the critical theory arena arguing for ethics as a key element of literary discourse.⁶ Avoiding evaluative judgments on the quality of literary texts, Booth was mostly concerned with the outcome of the encounter between reader, narrator, and author in ethical

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” p. 7.

² See, for instance, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988).

³ See *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986); *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990); “Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy” (1983).

⁴ “Introduction: The Double ‘Turn’ to Ethics and Literature?”

⁵ See, for instance, Buell, “Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics,” 9-10; Parker, *Ethics Theory and the Novel*, 33-34.

⁶ It may be worth mentioning here Tobin Sieber’s *The Ethics of Criticism*, which investigates various critical approaches in terms of their ethical presuppositions as well as in terms of the ethical attitudes they promote, thus linking literary theory and criticism directly with ethics.

terms: how does “the company one keeps” in the act of reading affect one’s moral perspective? What is the ethical affect of a text, for better or for worse? How does a book challenge the reader’s ethical assumptions?

Some of Booth’s questions were addressed from the perspective of moral philosophy by Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1988). In this book, Nussbaum demonstrates the importance of literary works in philosophical thought by focusing on ancient Greek tragedies to deliberate on the forces, both external and internal, that render human life vulnerable. Nussbaum believes that literature may provide much-needed context, a foundation of particularity, which will enable more substantive work in moral philosophy than positivist strains in ethics have made possible, a position that also informs her well-known book, *Love’s Knowledge* (1992). Here Nussbaum calls for a broadening of the scope of moral philosophy to incorporate literary texts, as the latter will be instrumental in facilitating a new approach to ethics, an approach more attentive to the emotional and imaginative dimensions of moral situations and less constricted by the norms of moral reasoning. However, while approaching the interrelation between ethics and literature from the perspective of a moral philosopher, Nussbaum simultaneously complains about literary theory’s tendency to ignore contemporary voices in moral philosophy, despite the fact that they have been responding, in ways both insightful and daring, to key ethical but also political issues of modernity at a time of global change. Even though, she says, “recent literary theory has taken a keen interest in philosophy” (169), for instance in the work of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Habermas and others, it is hard to ignore a “striking absence” in the field of literary theory, that

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. (170-71)

Nussbaum’s conception of the ethical is inseparable from her conception of emotive activity that is associated with the reading of literature; at the same time, she calls upon critical analysis to be more “attuned” to complex situations rather than treat textuality in a moral vacuum: critical theory leaves one with “an empty longing amounting to a hunger,” she says, for “some acknowledgement” of the crises that beset human life, for “writing about literature that talks of human lives and choices as if they matter to us all” (171).

And yet, ironically enough, it may have been the very emphasis that formalists and poststructuralists placed on rhetorical structures and on the ways in which language produces power that started paving the way for a reconsideration of literature’s intersections with ethics. In *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), for instance, J. Hillis Miller investigates the ethical obligation involved in the act of reading, especially in the context of what he regards as a critical shift away from formalism and aesthetics toward literature’s social, political and ethical functions. Miller’s

concept of an “ethics of reading” is embedded, as expected of a deconstructionist, in a performative model of language that produces contradictions and aporias, rather than the possibility of final interpretations. It is also disassociated from anything extraneous to the textual space per se, that is from any political or epistemological considerations: as he states, “If there is to be such a thing as an ethical moment in the act of reading, teaching, or writing about literature, it must be sui generis, something individual and particular, itself a source of political or cognitive acts, not subordinated to others” (5). In other words, to Miller, reading is a self-enclosed and self-referential act, which is the very condition of its being “ethical.” He even goes as far as to say that an ethical act that is “fully determined by political considerations or responsibilities is no longer ethical” (4). In his treatment of “the ethics of reading,” Miller argues simultaneously for the need to seek the “right” reading, as well as for the impossibility of ever finding it.

The vast distance that separates J. Hillis Miller’s definition of the “ethical” in literature from Wayne Booth’s, is just one of innumerable examples of theoretical and critical dissensus in the area of literary ethics, an area that in the past two decades has notably expanded, probably as a reflection of an ever-growing awareness that, under pressure from a rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape, neither the linguistic turn nor identity politics that dominated literary studies would or could address successfully real-life dilemmas. Still, despite theorists’ lack of agreement on what constitutes the “ethical” and how it relates to literary representation and the reading experience, there seem to exist two main strands:⁷ a “(neo-)humanist” or “neo-Aristotelian” narrative ethics on the one hand, and a deconstructive, “Levinasian” ethics on the other, also referred to by Dorothy Hale as “new” ethics. The former strand,⁸ centering around the work of Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum,⁹ deploys the Aristotelian model in exploring the ways in which the confluence of literary studies and ethics may serve to cultivate readers’ moral consciousness while providing answers to dilemmas that concern not only today’s crisis of values, but also human life in general. In her book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of literature in developing “the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (108).

The deconstructive camp reject the (neo-)humanists’ approach as totalizing, simplistic and predicated on the unified western liberal subject; they propose instead a model of narrative ethics that is much more aware of the discursive qualities of literary language, of the pitfalls of representation, and of the multi-dimensionality of the textual encounter.¹⁰ Inspired by the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, these scholars

⁷ See Marcus and Wrighton. In philosophical terms, the debate is between two competing critical camps, the Analytical and the Continental tradition.

⁸ Marcus identifies the following scholars as members of the (neo-)humanist camp: Cora Diamond, Samuel Goldberg, Alisdair MacIntyre, Colin McGinn, David Parker, James Phelan, D.D. Raphael, Leona Taker, Tzachi Zamir, among others.

⁹ There are of course significant differences between the two thinkers, which Nussbaum points out in her article “Reading for Life.”

¹⁰ Hale, in “Aesthetics and the New Ethics,” identifies the following theorists as “the most influential contributors to the new ethical defense of literary value” (899): J. Hillis Miller, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Derek Attridge, Geoffrey Galt Harphman, and Michael André Bernstein.

associate the “ethical” with respect of Otherness,¹¹ which includes a view of the author and the reader embracing the text as an “Other” that needs to be “respected rather than dominated and controlled by codes, principles, and categories of systematic cognitive analysis” (Marcus). They argue for new forms of relationality and responsibility that are not founded on the ontological certainty of subjecthood.

A representative voice of deconstructive ethics is Andrew Gibson who in *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* (1999) denounces Nussbaum’s grasp of contemporary narrative theory as “pre-Barthesian” (11). He also rejects Wayne Booth’s view of literary ethics as “essentialist” and naïve in its lack of awareness of the problematic of representation and narrative discourse. Gibson echoes J. Hillis Miller’s deconstructionist “ethics of reading” but is mostly based on Levinas’s idea of the subject’s (author’s, narrator’s, reader’s) confrontation with the Other, a confrontation that is deeply unsettling as it demands reorganization of the subject’s experiential categories.¹² To Gibson, the text’s polyvalence, the impossibility of it being reduced to a single pronouncement or principle, makes the process of ethical understanding complicated and uncertain in terms of outcome. Moreover, Gibson emphasizes the fact that, unpredictable as it may be, this encounter with the Other, an encounter which demands that the subject be both responsive and responsible, is affective rather than intellectual.

The ethics of alterity promoted by the Levinasian deconstructionists, based on the key principles of respect for the Other and empathy, have also been echoed by more politically oriented scholars and theorists in gender, postcolonial, race, and disabilities studies. Enmeshed with political questionings on identity construction, social justice, the limits of multiculturalism and the pitfalls of globalism, literary ethicists in minority and race studies equate the ethical with the political.¹³ Emphasis is placed here on the acts of storytelling and bearing witness as political gestures meant to reconstitute identities by opening up textual spaces outside the pale of dominant discourses; simultaneously, however, the practice of storytelling and bearing witness is an ethical act as it presupposes a choice concerning what story to tell and how to tell it (author) as well as what story to read or listen to (reader). The experience of reading/listening more specifically demands a choice to engage with othered positions. As Dorothy Hale states in her article, “Fiction as Restriction,” reading/listening is an intensely emotive and empathic act that necessitates subordination which operates on two levels: “the act of self-subordination that enables the apprehension of alterity; and a prior act that makes self-subordination itself possible—the will to believe in the possibility of alterity” (189). To narrative ethicists working on minority texts, story-telling and bearing witness through reading/listening are simultaneously political and ethical engagements: not only do they promote new understandings of the ways in which social and ideological conditions impact individual lives, but also invite us to explore the ways in which narrative’s formal

¹¹ In *Totality and Infinity* ([1961] 1969), Levinas defines the ethical as an opening of oneself to the Otherness of the other.

¹² See also Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics” (2009).

¹³ Richard Bernstein called for a coming together of narrative politics and narrative ethics in *The New Constellation* (1999).

structures may function to generate articulations on moral agency, on the ethics of affiliation, and on the relationship between power and morality.

Indeed, whether implicitly or explicitly, narratives (including nonliterary texts) do pose ethical questions, as narratologist James Phelan argues.¹⁴ This volume is an attempt to assemble some tentative responses on the relation between ethics and the narrative, without proposing any definite answers and without even limiting discussion to literary narratives per se. While the “turn to ethics” in literary studies has prioritized the encounter between reader and literary text as best illuminating the moral potential of the act of reading/writing, ethical significance is not to be found exclusively in literary texts, and literature is not the only discursive genre possessing ethical relevance. As several of the essays in this Special Issue suggest, an assessment of the interface of ethics and the humanities in the last four decades involves our engagement with various formal aspects of narrative texts, such as films, TV series paintings and testimonial accounts. Conversely, such relation between ethics and the narrative aims at offering affective knowledge about the conduct of life, whether articulated in terms of the neo-Aristoteleian (eudaimonistic) approach of analytic philosophy or by the continental philosophical theory from Heidegger and Levinas to Derrida and Judith Butler.

Our first contributor, Catherine Rogers, opens this Special Issue with an emphatic acknowledgment of the ethical force of narrative medicine and the ethical implications of the engagement between healthcare professionals and their patients. Acquiring the narrative skills of “recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness,” as physician and literary scholar Rita Charon claims, affords healthcare professionals insight into the patients’ world and their suffering. While scientific medical competence is indispensable in order to treat the patient’s medical problem, narrative competence invites “a move toward engagement, toward the intersubjective encounter which “incurs in us both responsibilities toward the other and transformations within the self,” Rogers asserts. Rogers describes a creative encounter between writing practice and narrative medicine scholarship: students of literature from the Aristotle University Thessaloniki (AUPh) School of English were invited to engage with selected literary texts related to trauma and illness, and to respond to them by writing creative works of their own. Her findings only attest to “the power of narrative to change the way care is given and received.”

Following this exploration of the ethical impact of the narrative, Adrienne Kalfopoulou examines the ethical implications of neutralizing the language of racism in canonical works, such as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Taking heed from Alan Gribben’s editorial re-visioning of the novel, Kalfopoulou, following bell hooks, sees linguistic whitewashing as an act of historical manipulation, an attempt to re-inscribe white assumptions of entitlement. The author considers canonical literary texts, such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* or David Mamet’s *Oleanna*, but also more recent debates on the ethical dimensions of language used as a signifying tool always implicated in a politics of representation. The article ends with a defense of

¹⁴ James Phelan, “Narrative Ethics.”

literature's "ability to articulate the seemingly inarticulate, its challenge, and pleasure, invested in the way it can reinvent the world" and provide "renewed ways to experience it."

From the ethics and politics of representation, we move on to Henry James's aesthetics of alterity. Greg Zacharias examines the Jamesian ethical imperative which involves an act of "recollection," a "melancholy" meditation, "the habit of mind that enabled and facilitated [James's] development and growth, the ethics of his life." James employs this strategy when writing to himself, when he engages with himself in his notebooks, in order to "face" the past, revise it and record that revision. This act of "looking back" and "feeling backward," to use Heather Love's phrase, finds its representation in a number of James's fictional characters. Zacharias explores a similar melancholic self-evaluation in the character of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Like her author, Isabel melancholizes over her past in order to recognize it, accept it, come into terms with it without forgetting it or leveling it, without attempting to suppress or silence it. This ethical stance toward the past encapsulates, as James wrote, "the whole operative consciousness and, best of all, ... a memory much enriched."

The next essay, by Michele Ware, explores the ethical relation between self and the community in the work of Edith Wharton and especially in her short stories. Although there has been significant critical disagreement concerning Wharton's moral philosophy, in the short stories the task of the individual, Ware argues, "almost always involves a choice between conventional morality and individual fulfillment." More specifically, Wharton's persistent portrayal of the impossibility of reconciling individual desire with one's moral obligations points to her tragic vision, but, renunciation, Ware shows, becomes "the beautiful act that restores significance to [characters'] lives." She concludes that, in her short fiction, Wharton aspires to a new moral order, more progressive and respectful of individual desire.

Yiorgos Kalogeras builds on the discussion of the problematic and entangled relationship between the individual and society, through analysis of three Greek American narratives in which ethnic characters perform acts of violence as revenge against institutional injustice, in an attempt to attain agency and find a place as Americans in a post-ethnic American society. Kalogeras focuses his attention on the irony such transgressive acts entail in that the subjects involved become Americans by applying an axiological and ethical system they brought with them from their pre-industrial home.

Next, Cheryl Chaffin shifts our attention to the tension between ethics and aesthetics inherent in the act of artistically representing Holocaust survivor memories. Chaffin is concerned with drawings and art installations by Polish film and theater costume designer, Marian Kołodziej, through which the artist attempts to render intelligible the seemingly "unrepresentable" experience of the Holocaust. Even though Kołodziej insisted that his was not "an exhibition, nor art," but "a journey by way of this labyrinth marked by the experience of the fabric of death," Chaffin claims that the artistic representation of the Holocaust is an ethical mandate and, to quote Kołodziej "a rendering of honor to all those who have vanished in ashes."

Melenia Arouh extends the artistic dilemmas surrounding the representation of the Holocaust experience, this time by focusing on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Taking into consideration criticisms of the film for stylizing the Holocaust and sanitizing it for a mainstream cinema audience, Arouh juxtaposes the intense moral message of the film and the ethical demands it makes through the formal strategies it employs. She contends that Spielberg knows how to handle his representational power and that, despite the controversy around the film, his filmic representation "communicates a message about humanity and the strength of individual action, a message that seems to hold moral power and significance."

The last essay of the Special Issue, by Donatella Izzo, addresses the philosophical and political function of detective fiction and its more recent instantiations in post-9/11 American TV series. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's notion of the sublime and Paul Ricoeur's conceptualization of justice and vengeance, Izzo is specifically concerned with what she calls the "divorce of the legal from the ethical." Focusing on the well-known TV series *Dexter*, Izzo argues that the homonymous protagonist's serial killing is dramatized in a way that constantly blurs the "thin line that separates murder from justice," legitimacy from violence. Izzo investigates this paradoxical conflation between Dexter's monstrous exceptionality and state violence, "the separation of 'force of law' from the law" (Agamben), which occurs when the force of law is separated from the law and associated with acts that suspend the law. In other words, Izzo reads Dexter's double life as operating along the same lines that were practiced and theorized by the Bush administration in the wake of September 11, 2001.

In his "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein says:

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.

This Special Issue is attempting to do just that.

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