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**Against Empathy: Levinas and Ethical
Criticism in the 21st Century**

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1 Introduction

»So – ethical criticism is back«, declares Marshall W. Gregory in his contribution to the debate initiated by the *Journal of Literary Theory* concerning the long-term relations between literature and ethics (Gregory 2010, 282). Gregory argues that ethical criticism has received a »second chance« after being »killed, crushed, annihilated« throughout the 20th century (ibid., 274). To avoid squandering this opportunity, he suggests, it is crucial to identify »what’s at stake in ethical criticism« (ibid., 282). In this article, we join Gregory and subsequent contributors in the effort to rethink the role of ethical criticism in the context of contemporary literary scholarship (Rabinowitz 2010; Groeben 2011; Titzmann 2012). We wish to turn attention to an issue that has thus far been largely ignored in this debate: the role of postmodern criticism in shaping the new face of ethical criticism. In particular, we challenge the concept of empathy and the assumption that empathy is a fundamental element of ethical reading.

The first three studies in the JLT controversy (Gregory 2010; Rabinowitz 2010; Groeben 2011) share a prominent assumption: that postmodern thinking has turned its back on ethics.¹ Gregory presents a historical account that aims to explain the various circumstances that »swept ethical criticism away« (Gregory 2010, 273) and the gradual changes that later led to its partial revival. He suggests that 20th-century »theory« is responsible for the fall of ethical criticism: enu-

1 At the beginning of his essay, Norbert Groeben formulates the critique of postmodernism made by both Gregory and Rabinowitz: »The point where Gregory and Rabinowitz are in complete agreement – as Rabinowitz himself explicitly mentions – concerns the overextended rejection of ethical judgments in the scholarly analysis of literature in postmodernism and post-structuralism.« (Groeben 2011, 131) Groeben then adds: »In my view, this criticism is entirely correct.« (ibid.)

merating various theoretical movements such as Marxism, Freudianism, post-colonial studies and deconstruction, he specifically notes »New Criticism« and »postmodernism« as critical approaches that »did more than merely discredit ethical criticism of the arts; they tended to discredit ethics as a general human enterprise« (ibid., 274).

Indeed, the 20th-century legacy of critical thinking, highly influenced by the historical developments of this era – two world wars, a surge in capitalism, a technological revolution, the dynamic forces of globalization and mass immigration – brought a great measure of instability and uncertainty to the discourse of ethics. This uncertainty has been discussed extensively by postmodern thinkers who, since the last decades of the previous century, have pointed out different aspects of »crisis« in Western philosophy, art and politics and the consequent dissolution of traditional forms of ethical thinking.² Our article sets out to explore the implications of this uncertainty for ethical literary criticism: Does the insecure grounding of ethics make ethical criticism impossible? Can ethical criticism exist in a postmodern era, sharing in postmodern discourse?

Contrary to Gregory's claim, we argue that postmodern thinking has actually played – and continues to play – an important role in the renewed interest in the field of ethics and in ethical criticism,³ although this approach has unsettled the established doctrines of modern ethical thinking.⁴ Specifically, postmodern thinking motivates us to challenge the idea of empathy as a basis for ethical reading, a notion that has overshadowed both the theory and the practice of modern ethical criticism. We argue that, to be a relevant approach in the study of literature today, ethical criticism must extend its scope beyond the ethics of narrative empathy. Looking at what we believe to be the most influential and interesting stream in postmodern ethical thinking – Emmanuel Levinas's conceptualization of the infinite responsibility towards the inaccessible other – we identify the major problems of the concept of empathy. We then offer an alternative way of thinking about ethical

² See Lyotard's famous discussion of the cultural crisis that characterizes post-industrial Western societies, in his *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). Frederic Jameson also writes about the »radical break or rupture« that »is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement« (Jameson 1991, 1), and Rosi Braidotti writes about the crisis of modern ethical thinking (Braidotti 2006, 11–29).

³ It is remarkable that several of the writers most identified with postmodern thinking have turned attention to the exploration of ethics. See, for example, Foucault 1994, Bauman 1993, Irigaray 1993, Cornell 1991, Derrida 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2002, Butler 2004, and Braidotti 2006.

⁴ In *Postmodern Ethics* Zigmunt Bauman clarifies: »the novelty of the postmodern approach to ethics consists first and foremost not in the abandoning of characteristically modern moral concerns, but in the rejection of the typically modern ways of going about its moral problems« (Bauman 1993, 3).

criticism as involving an attentive response to the representation of suffering while deconstructing the empathetic position of the reader. We illustrate our suggestion through a reading of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996).

2 Defining Empathy

The notion of *empathy*, which has long engaged philosophers, psychologists, and literary critics, refers to the human ability of thinking and feeling »with« the mental states of another person, »looking into« the other's mind and simulating his or her experience.⁵ As Rae Greiner explains, empathy often involves an intentional and conscious act of imagination or projection, since it is »a way for the ego to gaze upon itself and transport itself into the minds and bodies of others« (Greiner 2011, 418). This process in which the Self imagines itself in the place of another was highly praised in the 18th and 19th centuries by philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith, who thought of this process – which they referred to as »sympathy« or »fellow-feeling« – as the basis of pro-social behavior.⁶ Their analyses, in addition to works that emerged after the term »empathy« was coined in the early 20th century, conceptualized this process as fulfilling two roles: facilitating an understanding of other minds and promoting ethical action toward a suffering human-fellow.⁷ Artistic representations, in particular, were considered to be a means of simulating another person's inner state of mind.⁸ Empathy, therefore, has often been discussed as an aesthetic experience with ethical significance, an experience that takes place when readers engage emotionally with literary texts and simulate the internal perspective of fictional characters or narrators (cf. Keen 2007, 39–40).

Twentieth-century ethics of narrative empathy suggests that narratives employ rhetorical techniques that, by arousing readers' imaginations and inviting them to identify closely with fictional characters, open »a wide range of ethical

5 For an elaborate study of the concept of empathy, see the collection *Empathy – Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Coplan/Goldie 2011a); see also Hoffman's *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Hoffman 2000).

6 On the moral sentiment in 18th-century English philosophy, see Frazer 2010; see also Keen 2007, 42–48.

7 Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie explain this two-fold understanding of empathy in their introduction to *Empathy* (cf. Coplan/Goldie 2011b, ix–xvii).

8 On empathy as the effect of artistic representation, see Coplan/Goldie 2011b, viii–xliii; Feagin 2011. On the equivalent Victorian appraisal of sympathy in fiction, see Low 2007 and Greiner 2012.

responses« in the readers (Harrison 2008, 258).⁹ Gregory's model of a new ethical criticism presents an interesting version of such an ethics of narrative empathy. It consists of analyzing the various invitations that a literary work extends to its readers – »invitations to feelings«, »invitations to belief«, and »invitations to ethical judgment« (Gregory 2010, 291) – and constructing their possible ethical effects on the reader, who responds with a »yes« or a »no« to these invitations. Demonstrating his new model through Robert Herrick's 17th-century poem »Upon Julia's Clothes«, Gregory points to the »most obvious invitation« in the poem: »an invitation for the reader to enter the feelings and thoughts of the speaker« (ibid., 293). It is here that Gregory locates the ethical point: »As the reader empathetically replicates the speaker's feelings and point of view, he or she undergoes the ethically significant activity of seeing the world in this poem through another person's eyes, mind, heart, and feelings« (ibid., 294–295). Gregory's assumption that seeing through another person's eyes is »ethically significant« appears in various approaches of ethical criticism, of which the most famous is probably that of Martha Nussbaum.¹⁰ This idea is also implied by different scholars in the field of ethical criticism who refer to notions such as »moral knowledge« or »thought experiment« without mentioning the term »empathy«, but nonetheless contend that imagining a fictional situation from an inside-perspective is an ethically productive process.¹¹

Empathetic response involves perspective-shifting. Yet, not all perspective-shifting involves empathy. Amy Coplan distinguishes between what she calls »pseudo-empathy« (Coplan 2011, 12) – which consists of »self-oriented perspective-taking« that occurs »when we try to imagine how we would feel if in the other's situation« (ibid., 9, italics in the original) – and a true empathetic position of »other-oriented perspective-taking« (ibid., 13). Peter Goldie adds that the empathetic position of simulating the point of view, feelings and beliefs of another person is indeed imagining »*being* the other person« (Goldie 2011, 302;

⁹ Harrison enumerates several possible kinds of such ethical responses: »altruism and prosocial behavior, moral development, interpersonal bonding, and improved intergroup relations« (Harrison 2008, 258).

¹⁰ For a concise overview of the ethical significance of the empathetic response according to Nussbaum see »Exactly and Responsibly« (Nussbaum 2001).

¹¹ See, for example, Gregory Currie who writes on »moral knowledge«: »We imagine ourselves in a certain situation which the fiction describes, imagining ourselves to have the same relevant beliefs, desires and values as the character whose situation it is. [...] That way we learn something about the character. More importantly from the point of view of moral knowledge, we learn something about ourselves and about the things we regard, or might regard, as putative values.« (Currie 1995, 257) See also Colin McGinn's discussion of »ethical understanding« (McGinn 1997, 171–178) and Noël Carroll's discussion of »literary thoughts experiments« (Carroll 2002).

italics in the original). It seems that the ethics of narrative empathy and Gregory's model of ethical criticism refer – even if implicitly – to the latter, *other-oriented* empathetic response when analyzing the potential ethical effect of literature. That is, entering the deepest dimensions of the other's point of view and empathetically simulating her experience is considered to have an inherent ethical benefit: it shapes the readers' ethical beliefs and attitudes and thus promotes their ethical development. However, the conception of ethical reading that is based on simulating *being* another person raises several troubling questions: is it indeed possible to take the perspective of another – be it a real person or a literary character – and imaginatively simulate her subjective experience? Does the act of perspective-taking, together with the emotional response of empathy, produce an ethical effect on the readers? In what follows we call into question the idea that other-oriented empathy is possible and the assumption that simulating the inner perspective of the other is an ethical process of reading.

3 Challenging Empathy

Over the years critics have praised the power of literature to cultivate the capacity for empathy but also raised doubts regarding the potential of empathetic fictional reading to engender actual and long-lasting ethical influences.¹² A major point of disagreement in this debate stems from the question of whether literature-produced empathy indeed contributes to making individuals good citizens, sensitive and engaged with altruistic behavior. In this context, Suzanne Keen asserts that empathy with fictional characters has not been proven to activate helping behavior in the real social sphere (cf. Keen 2007, vii).

From a postmodern perspective, there are several other problems with the ethics of empathetic reading and its supposed effects on the readers. Theories that advocate empathy lean on the hypothesis of universality, apparent in the assumption that readers share universal feelings and experiences with various fictional characters or speakers, and can thus replicate those characters' inner perspectives. Specifically, the reader is assumed to have a privileged position that transcends limiting historical and social conditions and allows her to enter the mind of the fictional character and deeply understand that character's experience.¹³ Postmodern theories, in contrast, analyze the category of the »universal«

12 See Suzanne Keen's chapter »The Literary Career of Empathy« (Keen 2007, 37–64).

13 Andrew Gibson writes about the »Olympian height« of this ethical position (Gibson 1999, 11).

as a political illusion that serves to efface social injustices and to ignore crucial cultural differences (cf. Braidotti 2006, 23).

The postmodern perspective highlights a problem of presumptiveness in the universalist empathetic reading, especially when dealing with representations of historically excluded and devalued »others« whose suffering has been constantly silenced or distorted. First, we suspect that although »suffering« in general can be viewed as a shared human experience, empathetic reading can too easily involve disregard towards cases of distress that do not fit the conventional category of suffering. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) reflects this problem as it discusses the »dream image« of »the suburban housewife« in 1950s American culture (Friedan 1963, 18). The many consumers of this image – both men and women – had read about »the happy housewife heroine« (ibid., 33) in magazines and books and had seen her in films and in television commercials which invited an empathetic engagement with her point of view and values. Nonetheless, for many years they could not detect her misery – that which Friedan's book terms »the problem that has no name« (ibid., 20). As Friedan writes, »there was much sympathy for the educated housewife«, but no awareness of her profound despair (ibid., 23). Since her suffering could not be described »in terms of the age-old material problems of men: poverty, sickness, hunger, cold« (ibid., 26), nor explained by the familiar frameworks of understanding women's needs, even the most empathetic observers missed or misinterpreted her deep frustration.

Second, even when acknowledging the suffering of the other, an empathetic reading risks ignoring the concrete circumstances and the radical uniqueness of the sufferer. Under the presumption of empathy, people tend to dismiss aspects of difference and believe that they can truly know the subjective mindset of another person, sometimes even better than that person.¹⁴ Such presumptiveness has been at the core of colonial practices whose aim was to reduce the suffering of colonized others – that is, to reduce what Western colonizers understood, or misunderstood to be suffering.¹⁵

¹⁴ An ironic example of a well-meaning empathetic presumption is that of David Lurie from Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). As a loving father and as a professor of literature, skilled with the habit of empathetic reading, he feels himself »capable of imagining« his daughter's experience and even »suffering with her«, after they have both been violently attacked by strangers (Coetzee 1999, 140). The novel, however, shows that Lurie's pretension of an empathetic understanding only distances him from his daughter, from an understanding of her suffering and from the possibility of truly helping her.

¹⁵ See, for example, Wanhalla 2007 on eugenics practices of restricting the reproduction of the »unfit« in New Zealand in 1900–1935.

Narrative empathy must involve an interpretation of the experience of the other and thus it is liable to overlook the difficulty that a reader is likely to encounter in imagining the specific experience of the suffering of another, even if the character is accurately represented and the reader is very attentive. The problematic nature of this presumptiveness is revealed when we take a familiar literary example such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), and imagine how a woman in contemporary Western society might read it. Can we assume that such a reader is able to adopt Anna's perspective and put herself in the place of the agitated heroine when she reveals her pregnancy to Vronsky? It is probably possible to achieve what Goldie calls »imagining-how-it-is« (Goldie 2011, 305): when the reader imagines the *situation* in which Anna acts and infers the burden of distress that she feels.¹⁶ But if »the ethically significant activity« of the reading process involves empathy (Gregory 2010, 293), then we must ask if it is possible to imagine *being* Anna in that situation. Can we truly adopt Anna's inside point of view and share her deep feelings? We think that an answer of »yes« to these questions involves an essential blindness to the barriers that separate the reader from others – in this case from the concreteness of Anna Karenina's life. This raises a crucial question: if, in fact, it is not possible to achieve a true empathetic response – that is, to truly adopt Anna's perspective, to imagine being her – then what constitutes the ethical reading?

To cope with this question, we turn to Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophical writings offer a theoretical perspective for reconsidering the complexities of the empathetic response. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas criticizes the Western philosophical quest for total knowledge of Being and condemns it as the »imperialism of the same« (Levinas 2002, 87). The imperialistic project is due to the subject's search for coherent structures of meaning, conducted by subordinating the particular to the general and reducing the unknown to the framework of »sameness« (cf. *ibid.*, 42–48). Such a reduction also happens in a relationship between two people, when one party approaches the other with his thinking apparatus and tries to know and comprehend the other. According to Levinas, comprehension necessarily involves comparison to the self. This idea points to the risks of ethical reading that advocates an empathetic understanding of another person's mind. The risk is that instead of being oriented toward the other, the reader is actually projecting his or her thoughts, feelings and desires onto the imagined other, while violently ignoring the differences between them. When engaging in such projection, the reader is liable to ignore signs of suffering and distress that are outside his frame of reference.

¹⁶ Goldie stresses that such a process of »imagining-how-it-is«, which often occurs when reading fiction, is not a true empathetic response, since it does not involve entering the inside perspective of the character (Goldie 2011, 306).

Significantly, Levinas's notion of alterity is carefully distinguished from the common understanding of the other as relational to the self (cf. Levinas 2002, 203). Levinas argues that *Autrui* is not an oppositional concept that functions as an essential constituent of self-consciousness. Rather, human otherness signifies a radical uniqueness that cannot be conceptualized, thematized or comprehended, that can never be summed up or reduced to any one general structure or set of attributes (cf. *ibid.*, 73). According to this perspective, imagining being another person involves a denial of the special uniqueness that characterizes every human being and of »the radical separation between the same and the other« (*ibid.*, 36). For Levinas, it is this radical separation that ethically affects the subject and obligates him or her with an unconditional responsibility towards the other.

Thus, in opposition to theories of empathy, Levinas's conceptualization of subjectivity does not assume that the self can truly simulate another person's subjective experience, nor does it assume that the self can successfully perform the »imaginative project that requires a full understanding of the target's mental states« (Coplan/Goldie 2011b, v). Corresponding with postmodern attacks on the knowing subject, Levinas suggests a subject who is always already bound up with an »other« who is somehow unknown, towards whom the subject is totally indebted, without having any conscious, rational intention or free will. In Levinas's thinking, ethical relations with another person do not depend on knowledge or understanding, but instead involve a welcome of the unknown and the incomprehensible. In these ethical relations, the concrete face of the other, who »resists possession, resists my powers« (Levinas 2002, 197), does not invite me to an empathetic identification, but rather shakes my world, disturbs »the being at home with oneself« (*ibid.*, 39) and obligates me with unchosen responsibility for her. The ethical challenge is, then, to encounter the other person as a radical alterity, totally exterior and inaccessible, and nonetheless acknowledge the obligation towards her and be able to hear her call for help.

In addition to criticizing the notion that knowledge and understanding of another person are possible, Levinas's writing provides an illuminating perspective regarding the specific problems of empathy in relation to art. In an early essay, »Reality and Its Shadow«, Levinas condemns art as »the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow« (Levinas 1989, 132).¹⁷ Like Plato's criticism of representative art in the *Republic*, Levinas's essay argues that a piece of

¹⁷ On Levinas's negative approach to art, see Eaglestone 1997, 98–125; Robbins 1999, 75–90. Both Eaglestone and Robbins come to the conclusion that Levinas's work can nonetheless be read in ways that illuminate the ethical possibilities of literary texts (see Eaglestone 1997, 129–168; Robbins 1999, 127–131, 134–154).

art actually substitutes images for reality: distorted, deceiving and delightful, these illusions act like sleight-of-hand magic or rhythmic melody, imposing themselves on the consuming subject who »is caught up and carried away by [them]« (ibid., 132). Though Levinas makes no direct reference to the ethics of reading, his notion of artistic representation as a delusion in which distorted images efface the real is echoed in his later criticism of the effacement of alterity by the structures of the »Same«. According to this criticism, empathetic reading catalyzed by fictional art involves a delusive effacement of the distance between the reader and the fictional character. It is the power of fiction to recruit the imagination – in ways that involve deep emotional engagement with the artwork – and to make the reader believe in delusive ideas, that creates a special danger for the relations between the self and the other, even more than day-to-day encounters in the real world. This is because fiction gives the reader the illusion that she is actually entering a character's mind, achieving »a genuine understanding of another person's feelings, thoughts and character« (Gregory 2010, 293).

This illusion echoes the dream of »fusion« that Levinas criticizes in his essay »The Other in Proust«: »the idea that duality should be transformed into unity – that the social relation should end in communion« (Levinas 1996, 104). For Levinas, such a dream consists of the suspension of alterity, the unethical disrespect for the difference that escapes the possessive grasp of the reading subject. Thus, while striving to simulate the inside experience of a literary characters, empathetic reading becomes unethical, since it involves (even if unconsciously) an essential disregard for the inaccessible singularity of the other's experience.

In light of these concerns, we propose a new form of ethical criticism that leans on a basic suspicion towards the notion of empathy and empathetic identification. We suggest that, particularly in the globalized world of the 21st century, ethical criticism must take into account the ethical demands that arise when we face a radical stranger: the other whose feelings and thoughts we cannot enter yet who nonetheless demands responsiveness and responsibility from us. In a global world, empathy is not only impossible to achieve – if we mean it to involve a true reconstruction of the subjective experience of another person – but is a dangerous concept that obscures our obligation to those people who are not similar to us. Therefore, our notion of ethical reading demands that the incomprehensible other be allowed to remain singular and unexplained. Instead of attempting to obtain knowledge and an empathetic understanding, it strives to detect modes of distress and suffering that escape the scope of familiarity and the framework of comprehensible meanings.

Our proposed ethical criticism comprises two major elements: First, using close reading and deconstructionist methodologies, it explores the cultural and linguistic mechanisms that elicit perceived categories of »likeness« or »other-

ness«. It questions the »knowable« and engages in a textual struggle to prevent the reader from excluding and marginalizing those who do not seem »similar« or »understandable« to her. Second, like feminist and postcolonial approaches, our ethical criticism strives to reach forms of vulnerability and distress that elude conventional representation. By unsettling the process of empathetic response that literary texts often evoke, such a reading rejects commonplace images of otherness and acknowledges nameless conditions of suffering and neglected subjectivities. These two elements are combined in the main question that guides our ethical reading: how can the subject attend to the other and act – to use the Levinasian terminology – »for-another« without professing to *be* the other?

4 Atwood's *Alias Grace* and the Practice of Ethical Criticism

Let us elaborate on our proposed concept of ethical criticism through a reading of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). This novel not only exemplifies the tendency of fictional art to invite readers into relations of empathy with its characters but also provides opportunities to challenge the mechanism by which readers categorize characters as »similar« and to recognize the price of ignoring differences. These opportunities stem in part from the nature of the novel's protagonist, a convicted murderer, who, like some other literary criminals and murderers (for example, Raskolnikov of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Humbert of Nabokov's *Lolita*, or Hanna of Schlink's *The Reader*) presents the readers with extreme and irrevocable deeds that invite moral judgment but at the same time elude definitive comprehension and thwart any categorical conclusion.

The novel *Alias Grace* reconstructs a famous real-life murder affair in 19th-century Canada, in which a sixteen-year-old maid, Grace Marks, and her fellow-servant, James McDermott, were tried and convicted for the murder of their household employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. Both servants were condemned to death, but Grace's sentence was commuted to imprisonment. Grace spent more than 30 years in prison, in addition to a few years in a lunatic asylum, until she was pardoned and released in 1872. Atwood's novel recounts the gothic affair, combining known facts from available records with fictional elaborations of the events, and focuses, as its title indicates, on the mysterious identity (»Alias«) of Grace – mysterious because, as Atwood explains in the afterword to the novel, »[t]he true character of the historical Grace Marks«, who attracted much attention at the time, »remains an enigma« (Atwood 1996, 463). In spite of the guilty verdict, the nature of Grace's actual involvement in the

murder was never definitively established; the press presented many different accounts, polarizing public opinion concerning her.

The novel includes various texts that reflect the enormous interest that Grace aroused even years after the trial: poems that were written about Grace; Susanna Moodie's descriptions of the affair, published in her *Life in the Clearings* (1853); newspaper articles; and medical accounts written by Grace's doctors. The novel also incorporates documents from the Kingston penitentiary and segments of the historical confessions of the accused. The main fictive element of the novel is Grace's first-person account, told to the fictional Dr. Simon Jordan, whose mission is to explore Grace's mind (since she claims to have forgotten what really happened on the day of the murder) and to find answers to the factual questions surrounding her involvement in the crime. The merging of the various texts builds the detective plot of the novel and stages Grace as an object of constant examination and speculation. Her character is rendered through the inquisitive eyes that scrutinize her, driven by the common desire to decipher her personality and figure out who she really is: »an inhuman female demon« or »an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against [her] will and in danger of [her] life« (Atwood 1996, 23)? The desire to solve Grace's mystery is embodied in the fictional character of Simon, the representative of rational knowledge, who is sent to recover Grace's memory: »to probe down below the threshold of her consciousness, and to discover the memories that must perforce lie buried there« (ibid., 132). For him, Grace seems like »a locked box, to which [he] must find the right key« (ibid., 138).

However, in Atwood's fictional world there is no »right key« to the mystery of the past, nor to the mystery of an individual psyche. Simon's quest for univocal truth fails, and the reader's desire for a final resolution to the detective plot is frustrated. Grace remains elusive, and the ghostly revelation of her second self, who claims to have committed the murder, constitutes a strange, »rationally unacceptable« solution to the murder case (Staels 2000, 432). The irrational revelation happens in the scene of Grace's hypnotic confession, in which she speaks with the voice of her dead friend Mary Whitney and declares that Mary is the true murderer – as a ghost that entered Grace's body. Is this unexpected confession a performance that Grace enacts? Or does she truly suffer from some kind of split personality? Or was it indeed a ghost that committed the murder? The novel leaves these questions unanswered, and Grace herself »remains a secret« (Lopez 2012, 169).¹⁸

18 On the critics' different opinions concerning the possible answers see Niederhoff 2006–2007, 76–77.

The dominant critical approach to the novel emphasizes its postmodern rejection of the notion of »truth« as universal, transcendent, fixed« (Michael 2001, 438), and the consequent embracement of »the impossibility of knowing the truth« (Niederhoff 2006–2007, 77). The ethical reading we propose does not stop with the novel's rejection of truth, but rather focuses attention on the interlinking between the pursuit of truth – upheld both by the fictional characters and by the curious readers – and the ethics of empathy, which the novel evokes but also unsettles. We suggest looking at *Alias Grace* as a complex questioning of the empathetic position and its interrelations with knowing, violence and the effacing of difference. In our reading it becomes clear that empathy goes hand in hand with the requirement to know Grace and with the attempt to understand who she really is. The problem is that the process of obtaining knowledge of an individual's mind is reductive, aggressive and grounded in oppressive power-relations. Furthermore, to reach an empathetic understanding, readers must reconstruct the image of Grace so that she seems »like them« in some crucial aspects, a person whose identity is stable and coherent and with whom it is possible to identify. In this way we lose sight of Grace's singularity. An empathetic reading cannot welcome Grace's elusive subjectivity and face the suffering she articulates.

The invitation to empathy arises from Grace's first-person narration and her interior monologues, which appeal to the readers and encourage the process of perspective-shifting towards her. Such an empathetic perspective-shifting seems to be the ethical answer that opposes the social exclusion of Grace and her status as an ultimate inferior other. Grace is not only an outcast criminal accused of murder but also an Irish immigrant to Canada, an abused woman in the patriarchal culture of the mid-19th-century; she is a poor servant in a capitalist society and suffers from frantic outbursts. Thus, as Maria Lopez notes, Grace is represented as belonging to »the marginal communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people« (Lopez 2012, 157), and, as Grace herself recognizes, she functions as »an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well« (Atwood 1996, 22).

In her conversations with Simon, Grace forms her own autobiography and thus counters the image of an insane or cruel murderess. Her touching account reveals her miserable childhood, her traumatic journey to Canada, the brutal behavior of her father, the loss of her mother, the hardships of her employment in the new country, and the trauma of seeing her friend Mary Whitney bleeding to death after an abortion. As Marie-Thérèse Blanc writes, Grace's first-person recounting of her life story »constitutes a *counternarrative* to the novel's collected narratives of her arraignment for murder, of her trial, of her post-trial confession, and of her conviction and incarceration« (Blanc 2006, 106, italics in the original). Blanc's argument is that with Grace's personal narrative the novel »asks its readers to debate legal narrativity itself« (ibid.). We suggest that Grace's focalized

personal narration of her life story fulfills another role in her relations with both Simon and the reader – it invites them to empathize with her, to enter her point of view and simulate her subjective experience.

Empathy is invited not only by the personal themes of Grace's story and the technique of focalization but also by the many concrete details that fill Grace's narration of her material experience. Thus, for example, when Grace tells Simon about her awful trip to Canada, she makes her story sensible and vivid, describing the »greasy ladder« in the ship, the exact details of the »rough wooden slabs« on which the family slept (Atwood 1996, 113), and the terrible »stench« at night that »was enough to turn your stomach inside out« (ibid., 116). As she shares these meticulously detailed memories with her listener, Grace turns to Simon, mindful of the strong impression that her story is making on him, and says: »Perhaps you would like to open the window« (ibid.). This phrase reveals the implicit invitation that lies in her narration, to enter her perspective and achieve the empathetic position of imagining *becoming* Grace. Indeed, imagining ourselves in the stifling hold of the ship, in Grace's position, we indeed might feel it necessary to open a window and breathe in some fresh air.

Grace's interior monologues, which reveal her intimate thoughts and feelings, further invite the reader to empathy. These monologues, most of which are presented in conjunction with Grace's meetings with Simon (before, during and after), encourage the reader to reconstruct Grace's subjective experience from within. For example, in one meeting Grace ruminates on the smell of Simon's English shaving soap, thinking that »[i]t is a reassuring smell and I always look forward to it« (ibid., 97). The voicing of Grace's inner world presents a challenge to the conventional 19th-century representation of female killers as monstrously evil or insane, an image conveyed in some of the text excerpts included in the novel, such as that of Susanna Moodie. Moodie's text depicts Grace as insane, her face »lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like-merriment« (ibid., 45). In contrast, Grace's internal perspective establishes her as sane, aware and cultivated, a well-spoken woman who even remembers reading Walter Scott (cf. ibid., 247). As Niederhoff writes on Grace's narration: »Grace comes across as a compassionate, reliable and sensible woman, the last person on earth we would suspect of committing the murders she has been charged with« (Niederhoff 2000, 77).

Yet, this observation highlights a crucial point in our criticism of empathy as a basis for ethical reading: the invitation of the reader to undergo an empathetic shift in perspective towards Grace implies a removal of the disturbing aspects from her character. It means choosing one acceptable version of Grace – that of her image while talking with Simon and confessing her thoughts to the readers – and putting aside all the other constructions of her character that the novel provides, which

relate her to the murder. This removal and the portrayal of the speaking Grace as a gentle and cultivated woman, whose voice is »low and melodious« (Atwood 1996, 133) and whose hands are busy with patchwork quilting, make her seem like an appropriate domestic version of femininity, or »as a sort of unpaid servant« (ibid., 54), who has become a victim of harsh circumstances. This manner of encoding Grace's character and framing her narrative allows the reader to allocate Grace into the category of »likeness«; it establishes a reasonable and comprehensible identity for Grace that enables the reader to perform the imaginative leap of empathetic perspective-shifting. With this empathetic development, the reader, together with Simon, may reach the elevated liberal position of compassionate understanding of the poor woman instead of staying in the unpleasant state of total confusion and uncertainty concerning her true nature.

However, the novel disrupts this process of empathetic perspective-shifting, and we suggest that this disruption bears ethical significance. The disruption is achieved not only by blocking Grace's inner world when it comes to the murder affair, but also by warning the readers time and again that she may be telling lies or simply inventing engaging stories like »Scheherazade« (ibid., 377).¹⁹ This framing suggests that Grace is employing manipulative rhetoric to evoke empathy, a trap Grace's audience – Simon and the readers – fall into as a result of their desire to achieve the rewarding position of the moral subject who empathizes with the poor girl.

The ethical reading we pursue further calls attention to the violence that is involved in the process of establishing empathy with Grace. As the plot unfolds it becomes clear that empathy is dependent on our ability (and Simon's) to look into Grace's inner world and organize a coherent story around her, based on stable and comprehensible foundations. Indeed, theories of empathy assert that close knowledge of the other is a necessary condition for empathizing with him (cf. Coplan 2011, 13). However, *Alias Grace* also reveals that the process of obtaining a close knowledge of the other and forcing her to produce a coherent, intelligible story is violent and oppressive, a process that cannot serve as a starting point for an ethical relationship with the other.

The violence is prominent in Simon's quest for the truth about Grace, as implied by the many metaphors that describe his relations with her. For example, Simon tries »to open her [Grace] like an oyster« (Atwood 1996, 133), and wonders »whether Grace will at last crack open [...] or whether she will instead take fright and hide, and shut herself up like a clam.« (ibid., 307). Simon is aware of the »dark« sides of his profession and thinks about how »he has opened up women's bodies, and peered

¹⁹ On Grace as a sophisticated storyteller see Stein 1999, 107–109.

inside« (ibid., 82). His desire to »open up« Grace's mind seems to be just another stage in this violent project of gaining knowledge of the human species, which Simon views as essential to 19th-century progression (ibid., 300). Later, when Simon becomes discouraged in his lack of progress in deciphering Grace's mind, he thinks that »Knowledge of guilt, or else of innocence: either could be concealed. But he'll pry it out of her yet. He's got the hook in her mouth« (ibid., 322).

Critics have referred to the obsessiveness that characterizes Simon's treatment of Grace, his sexual fantasies of overpowering her, and his assertion of exploitive patterns with other women (Niederhoff 2000, 80; Rao 2009–2010, 74). Indeed, as the plot evolves and Simon's violent impulses are revealed, the reader's sympathies towards him dissipate. The common opposition between violence and empathy might imply that Simon's aggressive pursuit of Grace's nature contradicts the empathetic position. Yet our ethical criticism demands that we deconstruct this opposition and acknowledge that, in fact, Simon's violence is an integral component of his desire to understand Grace's inner mind, a desire that the reader, drawn in by Grace's narration, shares as well. It is not enough to criticize Simon's conduct without taking into account that our own interest in Grace implies that we, too, desire to obtain stable knowledge about her and to achieve a reductive decoding of her personality. We, too, seek a final, single answer to the question of Grace's guilt, try to extract such an answer from her multilayered story, and want »what she refuses to tell« – a truth concerning either her guilt or her innocence (Atwood 1996, 322).

Furthermore, in our attempt to achieve the empathetic position, we might tend to concentrate on Grace's traumatic history and reconstruct her image as an obvious victim – otherwise how could we empathize with her?²⁰ In the novel, such an approach is reflected by characters such as Reverend Verringer, who defend Grace, attempting to arouse empathy and compassion for her, viewing her as an innocent victim. However, the empathetic position on which Reverend Verringer leans is revealed to be very limited in its ability to actually help Grace, since it depends on »the theory of innocence«, (ibid., 77) which the expert opinion of Dr. Simon purports to sustain. Yet, although Simon himself comes to feel compassion for Grace (ibid., 320) and even »wants her to be vindicated« (ibid., 322), he withdraws and flees when her mysterious second self appears. Empathy and compassion cannot be sustained when the target eludes definitive identity and remains, as Simon describes Grace in a letter, an »enigmatic mirage« (ibid., 424).

²⁰ The emphasis of Grace's traumatic trials is very prominent; see Howells 2000, 152–153; Stein 1999, 108.

The postmodern ethical reading we promote requires that we consider the ethical responsibility towards those others whose identity escapes definitive categorization, while taking into account the secrecy that lies at the core of our relations with another person. An ethics of empathy implies that when empathy fails – as in the case of Grace, who ultimately eludes empathetic understanding – there is nothing more to do in ethical terms: we come to a dead end in our relations with Grace. In opposition to such an approach, we suggest posing the question that Simon and other characters who handle Grace's case do not dare to ask: what is my obligation to those persons outside the scope of similarity and empathy? What am I to do to respond to a person like Grace, whose cry for help does not go hand in hand with a potential for empathetic understanding? The ethical reading that we propose demands that we renounce the question of *who* Grace Marks is and welcome her as she is, with the wide range of undetermined possibilities – a decent woman and a murderess, a talented storyteller and a trickster, a victim and a manipulator – without excluding those features that are unpleasant, irrational or incomprehensible, and without forcing them into a coherent story in which they all fit together.

In this context, it is notable that although the novel includes many different kinds of texts – medical, poetical, journalistic and legal – that describe Grace's character, all texts reduce the richness of her personality to a single theme: her involvement in the murder. By refusing the novel's pursuit of truth and the common binary opposition this pursuit assumes – the opposition between strong condemnation and an empathetic understanding of Grace – the reader can refuse to collaborate in reproducing Grace's thematization and her historical objectification. This approach also enables us to notice that by concentrating on the question of Grace's guilt and on her past actions, the various texts generate blindness towards the cruel conditions of her present time, in which she is incarcerated in prison. These conditions almost escape our attention because we are so involved in deciphering Grace's mind and solving the questions surrounding her exact involvement in the crime. We suggest that regardless of whether or not Grace is indeed a criminal, whether she has a history of traumatic victimization or is only inventing this history in her narration, whether or not she is sane – the important ethical point is to recognize her as a subject to whom we are indebted and, while refusing the temptation of empathy, to acknowledge her concrete suffering: Grace is isolated and starved in jail (cf. *ibid.*, 34–35); she is sexually abused (cf. *ibid.*, 79, 240), deprived of sunlight (cf. *ibid.*, 237), and subjected to beating and pinching (cf. *ibid.*, 239).

Our notion of ethical criticism, inspired by Levinas, addresses the impossibility of achieving full understanding of either real persons or fictional characters. It demands an attentive awareness to the ways in which we tend to construct and reconstruct categories of similarities and indulge in the position of empathetic identification with those who seem similar to us. This is indeed the responsibility

of the reader as she interprets a text: to refuse the position of empathy and develop an awareness of its blind spots and dangers. As we have shown, in *Alias Grace* the process of empathetic perspective-shifting involves a reshaping of the protagonist so that she comes to fit a certain acceptable image of womanhood. Our analysis also reveals that this process is intertwined with the violence of getting to know Grace, and that it fails when the impossibility of attaining such knowledge is established, that is, empathy is revealed to be blocked when the personality of the other evades definition and understanding. However, an incomprehensible person may also be suffering and in need of help, and the ethical reading we suggest advocates recognition of such suffering and the human obligation to help the sufferer, no matter who she is.

5 Conclusion

Ethical literary criticism is a dynamic field of study whose evolution is intimately intertwined with historical changes in the philosophical conceptualization of ethics and with cultural inquiries concerning subjectivity and social relations. While the last decades have presented a profound challenge to traditional ethical criticism, it is certainly not yet time to mourn the death of ethical criticism altogether. In this article we have argued that the postmodern notions of uncertainty and indeterminacy are not destructive to the field of ethical criticism, even though they demand its rethinking. We believe that such a rethinking and a reexamination of our basic assumptions and inclinations concerning ethical reading are crucial for rejuvenating the field of ethical criticism.

We have presented such a reexamination in our approach to the idea of empathy, by challenging it as a basis for ethical reading while offering a new approach to ethical criticism in the 21st century. We showed that instead of looking back and rehabilitating the ethical tradition of empathetic reading, we can find in Levinas's philosophy a potential means of reconsidering the relations between ethics and literature. Elaborating on Levinas's ethics, we called into question the idea that true empathy is possible and the assumption that simulating the inner perspective of the other is an ethical process of reading. Instead, we argued for casting suspicion on the category of »sameness«, suggesting that doing so facilitates a new understanding of the responsibilities of the reader. Since we regard fictional reading as a day-to-day real-life activity, we believe that a deep consideration of the subject's responsibility to the others she encounters in fictional texts is an important ethical undertaking. As our detailed example of the reading of *Alias Grace* reveals, this is not only a theoretical idea, but a call for a specific process of reading, one that involves a constant mistrust of the reader's inclination to achieve an empathetic identification with the other. In

our view, the ethical crux of reading is to acknowledge the suffering of the other without appropriating him or losing sight of his singularity. We are certain that further development of this consideration through the analysis of different texts and various situations of personal and social encounters will ensure that ethical criticism remains an important and productive pursuit of literary studies.

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