

Ethics and Literature: Introduction

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Without storytelling there is no theory of ethics (Miller 1987; 3).

Art and philosophy, aesthetics and ethics, have exhibited strong ties throughout human history. In particular, the dual commitment of literature to aesthetic principles and narrative themes and the dual commitment of ethics to abstract models and to human experience have created multifaceted bonds between the two disciplines. Literature can illustrate philosophical ideas and illuminate actual moral life, it can “supply the kind of experience needed to develop a person’s faculty of moral judgment” (DePaul 1988; 563), and by animating the actual performance of certain ethical issues can “bridge the gap between abstract ethical principles and the concrete circumstances of real cases” (Tomlinson 1997; 126). Philosophy can explore moral concepts and examine moral theories through literary texts. Often, literary texts put complex situations under a new light, and hence create an opportunity for thought experiments (Currie 1998; 176) and ethical expeditions (McGinn 1997; 177). Literature can serve as a moral laboratory (Hakermulder 2000), a secure and imaginary space where one can question beliefs and practices, gain back lost concepts (Diamond 1983, 1988), test theories and their applications, simulate different scenarios and stances, and formulate desirable principles.¹

In 2006, *Philosophia* published a Call for Papers on Ethics and Literature. As the field is very rich, we received numerous submitted papers, dealing with many different topics and texts. It has therefore been decided to launch a series of papers on this topic, to appear in some volumes of *Philosophia* in a special section.

Editor

¹Related research is extensive. Many discuss the role of literature in shaping human experiences (DePaul 1988; McCormick 1983; Nussbaum 1983, 1990; Palmer 1992 and Swanger 1993). For the educational perspective see Parr (1982). *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Mearsheimer 1998) has published a debate regarding moral education in universities (see Booth, Barnn, Mearsheimer, and Nussbaum). For the development of the concept of literature as thought experiment see Currie (1995, 1998); McGinn (1997) and Carrol (1998, 2000, 2002). For the concept of literature as moral laboratory see Hakermulder (2000).

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Although literature and ethics have different methods, strategies, and goals, they are both forms of writing which deal with human lives; they both can be viewed as models of moral attention (Adamson 1998; 92–93). Nevertheless, until the last decades, the two disciplines were totally distanced. As Lawrence phrased it: “They used to be one, right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted, like a nagging married couple [...] so the novel went sloppy, and philosophy went abstract-dry” ([1932] 1966; 117). What has created the deep alienation? And what has brought them together?

Since the ancient quarrel between Aristotle and Plato,² literary criticism has swung between a dogmatic–didactic school and a formalist–aesthetic school.³ The former – dominant in periods when art was supported by the church – used the literary text as an educational instrument. The latter – the modernist view, which started with the enlightenment and flourished during the early decades of the twentieth century, together with development of the theory of aesthetics – went against the inclusion of external interests, including ethics, in the process of reading and evaluation. As epitomized by Wilde’s famous words “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” [in Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde [1890] 1948)].

The dichotomy between the disciplines and the inclination towards more scientific methods within the humanities left their marks on philosophy and ethics too. Modern and Enlightenment philosophers, such as Descartes, Hume and Kant, were “skeptical of the creative imagination of poets and novelists” (Novitz 1998: 94). The literary imagination was perceived as irrational and misleading, hence could not contribute to forming ethical principles. During the first half of the twentieth century, with the growth of analytic philosophy, the divide between ethics and literature appeared deeper than ever. Yet half a century later, the picture in both disciplines has changed. New and renewed currents in literary criticism and in moral philosophy, often enriching former theories, brought additional dimensions and created opportunities to combine ethics and literature.

In the field of literary theory, new currents such as post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism, and post-colonialism, considered past efforts to build a literary science as useless and even misleading and immoral. These currents abandoned the formal procedure of reading, while pointing out the complicated relationships between words and worlds. Every text is considered unreadable (Miller 1987), and every text contains traces of social, political, and ethical issues, whether in an overt form, or unconsciously (Jameson 1981). Following philosophers and theorists from Foucault to Levinas,⁴ asking questions about truth and power, and realizing the commitment to the other, the new currents in literary theory have had good reasons to discuss literature and ethics together.

During the same period, moral philosophy has gone through comparable significant changes. Alongside the rich and fruitful work on the Kantian deontological theories and Utilitarianism or ‘consequentialist’ theories, which formulate moral rules based on human rationality, a new place was found for Aristotle’s virtue ethics (Anscombe 1958; Crisp and Slote 1997, 1–2). The renewed interest in Aristotle and its focus on virtue and human

²See Nussbaum (1990), Kronick (2006).

³Referred sometimes as moralism and autonomism/aestheticism.

⁴The renewed study of literature and ethics deals intensively with Levinas (see Eaglestone 1997; Gibson 1999, and Robbins 1999). Levinas himself, in his paper “Reality and its Shadow” (1948) was very skeptic about the place of literature as a source of ethical insights.

flourishing created an opportunity to develop strong ties between ethics and literature.⁵ This has led many philosophers, such as Murdoch (1970), MacIntyre (1981), Williams (1981, 1985), and Nussbaum (1983, 1988, 1990, 1995) to reopen discussion of ethics and literature.

Over the last two decades, a significant number of papers, books, and special volumes have dealt with ethics and literature, often using the term “ethical criticism”.⁶ The subject is rich in themes and methodologies. A variety of philosophical and literary texts is considered. The spectrum is wide: examining moral themes in literature, assuming that the character’s behavior can be understood on the basis of its similarity to what we have known and thus can be interpreted by our own terms, resources, and our own “admittedly incomplete sense of life” (Nussbaum 1990: 28); formulating the relationships between the two disciplines, understanding the differences between them and the opportunities for their intersection (Adamson 1998; Carrol 1998, 2000, 2002; Diamond 1998; Hains 1998; Mendelson-Maoz 2007; articulating the relationships between readers, narrators, and authors, as ethical relationships (Booth 1988; Newton 1995); building new procedures for reading in the light of humanism (Schwarz 1990, 2001); examining the power of literary texts in educating young people, assuming that texts can shape beliefs and behaviors, and can help in understanding ethical dilemmas (Brandt 1988, Coles 1989; DeMarco 1996; Parr 1982); illustrating ethical reasoning and theories through reading of literary texts, considering the text to be a moral laboratory (Pojman 2004; Massey 1987); examining literary texts, articulating rhetoric devices and their power in creating ethical judgments, and suggesting close readings and interpretations of specific texts (for example the extensive writing on James’ *The Golden Bowl*, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and Shlink’s *The Reader*⁷); revealing a way of ethical reading of text, which involves an awareness to social, political, and ethical streams that often go beneath the texts, and explores power relations, arguing that “ethics is recognized as deeply embedded in discussions of power, of voice and agency, and in textual concerns with the effects of presence and absence” (Fahraeus 2005; 7) (Buell 1999, Attridge 1999, Harpham 1992, 1999; Nash 1994; Said 1971); and a re-reading of philosophical and theoretical texts relevant to this intersection (Miller 1987; Robbins 1999; Gibson 1999; Eaglestone 1997).

⁵Rorty’s pragmatism (1982, 1989), which suggests a new meaning to the dichotomy between science and poetry, objective and subjective, and truth and fiction, provides further justification to discuss ethics and literature.

⁶The rise of ethical criticism is impressive. Several journals devoted special issues to the subject: *New Literary History* 1983 (Diamond, Murray, Nussbaum, Putnam, and Raphael), *Ethics* 1988 (Backer, Booth, Diamond, Nussbaum), *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America) 1991 (Attridge and Buell), *Yale French Studies* 1999 (Nouvet), and *Poetics Today* 2004 (Askin). *Philosophy & Literature* has devoted an issue to a Symposium on Morality and Literature (hosting the debate between Nussbaum and Posner) in 1998, and deals with ethical criticism almost in every volume. Examples of Survey articles include Buell (1999), Fahraeus (2005), Parker (1998), and Stow (2000). Many volumes and books have been published in the last two decades. Volumes include Adamson, Freadman, Parker (eds.) 1998; Cascardi (ed.) 1987; Davis, Womack (eds.) 2001; Fahraeus, Jonsson (eds.) 2005; Hadfield, Rainsford, Woods (eds.) 1999; Levinson (ed.) 1998, Nelson (ed.) 1997; Phelan (ed.) 1989, Toker (ed.) 1994, Wihl, Williams (eds.) 1988. Books include Barbour 1984; Berthoff 1986; Booth 1988; Clausen 1986; Cunningham 2001; Eaglestone 1997; Gibson 1999; Goldberg 1993; Harpham 1992, 1999; Johnson 1993; McGinn 1997; Nussbaum 1990, 1995; Newton 1995; Palmer 1992, Parker 1994, Price 1983, Robbins 1999, Siebers 1988, 1992.

⁷The list of specific references is outside the scope of this introduction.

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