Prologue

Ethics and Poetics: An Uneasy Affair

A book including the word "ethics" on its cover invokes, for better or for worse, a certain professional affiliation with the field of philosophy and, more specifically, the philosophical branch of ethics. This book, however, is neither written *by* a philosopher, nor is it, strictly speaking, written *for* philosophers. As a matter of fact, philosophers, especially those who professionally concern themselves with questions of ethics, will likely perceive this book to be a great disappointment. The book will disappoint professional philosophers because it conceives ethics in an extremely flexible sense as it arises out of the reading of individual texts that, in their nuances and particularities, remain defiant to philosophical conceptualization. Moreover, this book is doomed to dissatisfy philosophers, since it is not framed in terms of established philosophical ideas or positions but instead limits itself to a cursory and narrowly focused engagement with such positions, an engagement hardly contributing to the existing philosophical scholarship. Professional ethicists might, finally, experience this book as underwhelming insofar as it does not attend to "ethics," as commonly understood, as the study of moral values and their justification; it deals with ethics in a rather particular way, one we shall later describe as "literary ethics," an approach that seeks to evoke interest in literary circles, but one that can, at best, hope for open-minded skepticism among philosophers. Why then—with so little hope for philosophical dividends—a book on "ethics," and why such a book by a literary critic who lacks any certified expertise on the matter and who, in fact, would not lay claim to such expertise? Precisely what sort of competency might a literary critic, trained in the art of close reading and poetic scrutiny, bring to the table that could be relevant to the issue of "ethics"?

This book—in the course of seven essays—performs readings of theoretical, literary, and cinematic works that appear noteworthy for the ethical questions they raise. Via critical analysis of writers and filmmakers whose projects have changed our ways of viewing the modern world, these essays furnish a cultural base for contemporary discussions on totalitarian domination (chapter 1), lying and politics (chapter 2), the relation between law and body (chapter 3), the relation between law and justice (chapters 4 and 5), our ways of conceptualizing "the human" (chapter 6), and the question of violence (chapter 7). Yet if the "common denominator" is what may be described as "ethics," then ethics is never addressed "in general." It seems

that whatever understanding of the ethical one may have, it is always contingent on a particular mode of presentation (*Darstellung*), on particular aesthetic qualities and mediatic specificities. Whatever there is to be said about ethics, it is still bound to certain forms of saying, certain ways of telling, certain modes of narration. That modes of presentation differ across genres and media goes without saying; that such differences are intimately linked with the question of the ethical will emerge with increasing urgency.

To be sure, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics has been subject to scholarly debate for some time. This debate, which could easily be traced back to Plato's and Aristotle's respective reflections on the matter, finds—in its contemporary configuration—perhaps its most significant forerunner in early twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In conversation with his friend Friedrich Waismann, Wittgenstein stated: "In ethics, one constantly tries to say something that does not concern and can never concern the essence of the matter. It is a priori certain that, whatever definition one may give of the Good, it is always a misunderstanding to suppose that the formulation corresponds to what one really means."[1] Such skepticism regarding the possibility of grasping the essence of ethics by dint of propositional language pervades much of the late twentieth-century philosophical literature concerned with the nexus between ethics and language. "If a man," Wittgenstein elaborates in imagistic terms in his 1929–30 "Lecture on Ethics," "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. Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural."[2] The purported insufficiency of propositional language in the face of ethics, that is, ethics' resistance to lending itself as "subject matter" to philosophy, indeed leads Wittgenstein to speak of a "characteristic misuse of our language [that] runs through *all* ethical . . . expressions."[3] He concludes that "to write or talk Ethics [is] to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless."[4]

The vexed relationship between ethics and language in general, and ethics and poetic language in particular, lies at the heart of much of the contemporary "literature and ethics" debate as it has evolved over the course of some thirty years now. The profound hopelessness invoked by Wittgenstein did not prevent this debate

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein," *Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 12–16, here 13.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 3–12, here 7. Wittgenstein translates this contention into the language of yet another image, according to which "a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water" (7), even if one pours out a gallon over it. And as a teacup is confined to the limits of a teacup, so propositional language cannot exceed its own limits, cannot appropriate what lies "*beyond*" itself, namely ethics (11).

3. Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," 4, 9.

4. Ibid., 11f.

from becoming an academic growth industry, including, in the forefront, such notable philosophers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, and Martha Nussbaum, as well as eminent literary critics the likes of Wayne Booth, Tobin Siebers, and J. Hillis Miller. "Their combined efforts have signaled what has come to be perceived and referred to as a 'turn to ethics' in literary studies and, conversely, a 'turn to literature' in (moral) philosophy," Michael Eskin writes in the introduction to the 2004 special issue of *Poetics Today,* "The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature."[5] In the subsequent pages I hope to flesh out some of the major positions that have been assumed in this debate, first by three philosophers (namely MacIntyre, Rorty, and Nussbaum) who exemplify moral philosophy's turn to narrative, then by three literary critics (Booth, Siebers, and Miller) who represent literary studies' turn to ethics. What should result from this is a sense of how my own thoughts on the interrelatedness of ethics and poetics correspond with and especially differ from the canonical positions on the subject.

Philosophy's Turn to Narrative

One of the most broadly conceived positions concerned with the relation between ethics and language has been that of Alasdair MacIntyre, who, in his 1981 *After Virtue,* claimed that "the language of morality is in [a] state of grave disorder": "What we possess . . . are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality."[6] In response to this state of "grave disorder," MacIntyre brings into play the powerful cultural tradition of *storytelling.* More concretely, he juxtaposes the presumed "liquidation of the self into a set of demarcated areas of role-playing" with his own—distinctly *narrative*—concept of selfhood, "a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end."[7] What emerges forcefully here is MacIntyre's underlying postulation according to which "man is in his actions and practice . . . essentially a storytelling animal."[8] Once the axiomatic assumption of it being "natural . . . to think of the self in a narrative mode" has been accepted, it seems to follow quite naturally that we conceptualize "human actions . . . as enacted narratives."[9] "Because we

5. Michael Eskin, introduction to "The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature?" special issue, *Poetics Today* 25.4 (2004): 557–72, here 557.

6. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 2. I quote from the second edition, published in 1984.

7. MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 205.

8. Ibid., 216.

9. Ibid., 206, 211. One of the frequently articulated criticisms launched against MacIntyre consists precisely in this seemingly natural contiguity of human actions and narrative acts. Paul Ricoeur writes: "MacIntyre is mainly considering stories told in the thick of everyday activity and does not attach any

all live out narratives in our lives," MacIntyre submits, "and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out . . . the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others."[10] Hence, there are two overriding and intimately related questions permeating MacIntyre's study in moral theory. "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" is, according to MacIntyre, the primary question, which precedes the pivotal question, "What am I to do?"[11]

While, according to MacIntyre, narratives are what allow us to (anticipatorily) prescribe and (retrospectively) justify our actions and behaviors, he insists that "I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual."[12] MacIntyre adamantly refutes the modern and individualistic perspective "according to which the self is detachable from its social and historical roles and statutes."[13] Rather, "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide."[14]

Needless to say, it is here that one of the more questionable aspects of MacIntyre's conception of narrative selfhood surges to the fore. For while he points out that "the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community," it nevertheless appears as if MacIntyre's claim—according to which one has to find "moral identity in and through" one's socio-historically determined "membership in communities"—has very little to offer to those who historically have been denied communal membership and consequently found, and find, themselves on the margins of society.[15] At any rate, what appears particularly pertinent in our context is MacIntyre's overt impatience with ventures "into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such, whether in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern

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decisive importance, at least with respect to the ethical investigation he is conducting, to the split between literary fictions and the stories he says are enacted. . . . For MacIntyre, the difficulties tied to the idea of a refiguration of life by fiction do not arise. However, he does not draw any benefit . . . from the double fact that it is in literary fiction that the connection between action and its agent is easiest to perceive and that literature proves to be an immense laboratory for thought experiments in which this connection is submitted to an endless number of imaginative variations" (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 159).

10. MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 212.
11. Ibid., 216.
12. Ibid., 220.
13. Ibid., 221.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. For a thoughtful critique of MacIntyre's narrative approach to ethics along those lines, see Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 59–61.

analytical philosophies."[16] MacIntyre unambiguously asserts that "what I am . . . is in key part what I inherit."[17] In the light of this predication, according to which any moral theory requires a historically embedded "understanding of social life," it perhaps comes as no surprise that MacIntyre deems "the Aristotelian moral tradition . . . the best example we possess of a tradition whose adherents are . . . entitled to a high measure of confidence in its . . . moral resources."[18]

Indubitably, such theoretical alliance with the classic Aristotelian tradition of moral virtues is shared by other philosophers who address ethical concerns from a narrative perspective, one of them being Richard Rorty. In his 1989 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* Rorty argues that "fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves."[19] It is therefore that novels, according to Rorty, have become—"gradually but steadily" and in contradistinction to the philosophical treatise—"the principal vehicles of moral change."[20] Notably, this claim constitutes a critical dimension of Rorty's liberal utopia. "In my utopia," he expounds,

> human solidarity would be seen . . . as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as *we* would," or "There must be always suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?"[21]

The notion of "solidarity" put forth here is expressly *not* to be "thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings," but rather as "the ability to see more and more traditional differences . . . as unimportant when compared

16. MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 221.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 225, 277.
19. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi. "The books which help us become less cruel," Rorty specifies, "can be roughly divided into (1) books which help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others and (2) those which help us to see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others. The first sort of book is typified by books about, for example, slavery, poverty, and prejudice. . . . Such books help us see how social practices which we have taken for granted made us cruel. The second sort of book . . . is about the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people. . . . The most useful books of this sort are works of fiction which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person" (141).
20. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* xvi.
21. Ibid.

with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us.'" Evidently more sensitive to the distinct status of communal insiders and outcasts than MacIntyre, Rorty concludes that the "process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like." And this dual task is precisely one that, according to Rorty, a philosophical treatise is less likely to accomplish than is "ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel." The paradigmatic shift from theory to fiction described here signifies, in the context of Rorty's "liberal utopia," no less than a "general turn against theory and toward narrative." Rorty considers such a turn as "emblematic of our having given up the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary." It amounts to a "recognition" of what he calls the "contingency of language"—"the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling." The "historicist and nominalist" culture Rorty envisages (and which only obliquely ties him to MacIntyre) thus settles "for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other."[22]

The predicament with this approach is that Rorty's account of literature remains confined to the propositional dimension of language while failing to acknowledge its less graspable figurative force.[23] In Rorty's theory, the pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman aptly notes, "literature seems almost reduced to a branch of practical moral philosophy."[24] Whereas Rorty holds that aesthetic and ethical aspects of literature are to be treated as "distinct, non-competitive goods,"[25] I would contend that aesthetic and ethical elements are inextricably linked—to the effect that a text's aesthetic features may profoundly determine its ethical thrust.

A final example of the Aristotelian approach to ethics discussed here—and understood, in the words of Geoffrey Galt Harpham, as "markedly worldly and social and…in this respect…consistent with the representational habits of

22. Ibid., 192, xvi.

23. See Christoph Demmerling, "Philosophie als literarische Kultur? Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie, Philosophiekritik und Literatur im Anschluss an Richard Rorty," in *Hinter den Spiegeln: Beiträge zur Philosophie Richard Rortys mit Erwiderungen von Richard Rorty,* ed. Thomas Schäfer et al. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 325–52, here 350f., quoted in Günter Leypoldt, "Literatur als Angebot 'nützlicher Metaphern': Richard Rortys literarische Ethik," in *Literatur ohne Moral: Literaturwissenschaften und Ethik im Gespräch,* ed. Christof Mandry (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003), 123–44, here 130.

24. Richard Shusterman and Günter Leypoldt, "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of Richard Shusterman: A Conversation," *ZAA: Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 48 (2000): 57–71, here 67, quoted in Leypoldt, "Literatur als Angebot," 130 n. 13.

25. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* 147.

narrative"[26]—presented itself with Martha Nussbaum's voluminous and highly influential 1990 study, *Love's Knowledge,* which eventually will serve as distinct counterexample to the model I hope to develop. Nussbaum argues "for a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity" and gives considerable "priority to the perception of particular people and situations."[27] In correspondence with her expressly Aristotelian conception of ethics, she stresses the importance of "the study of the social conditions of human life," which she, like Rorty, argues, find a "most appropriate expression . . . in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical." Consequently, Nussbaum not only urges us to "broaden our conception of moral philosophy in order to include these texts inside it," but indeed she seeks to provide some of the required methodological groundwork by articulating the relationship "within such a broader ethical inquiry, between literary and more abstractly theoretical elements." This involves an appreciation of "valuable aspects of human moral experience that are not tapped by traditional books of moral philosophy." If the project of moral philosophy implies "a pursuit of truth in all its forms," Nussbaum insists, "then moral philosophy requires . . . literary texts, and the experience of . . . attentive novel-reading, for its own completion."[28]

The emphasis on "*attentive* novel-reading" denotes a central tenet of Nussbaum's position and finds itself substantiated in the context of her reflections on the importance of "perception," understood as "the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation."[29] The objective, in the words of writer Henry James, one of Nussbaum's central referential figures, is that of becoming "'finely aware and richly responsible.'"[30] Notably, the task "to make ourselves people 'on whom nothing is lost'" is,[31] she claims, furthered by novels not merely thematically, that is, by dint of ethical "terms and conceptions."[32] Nussbaum remarks: "Moral knowledge . . . is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in

26. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Ethics and Literary Criticism," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism,* ed. Christa Knellwolf and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9:371–85, here 378.

27. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix.

28. Ibid., 139, ix, 143, 26. In *The Fragility of Goodness,* Nussbaum correspondingly states: "A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active. Interpreting a tragedy is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example" (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 14).

29. Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness,* 37.

30. Henry James, preface to *The Princess Casamassima,* quoted in Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 37, 148, and 199.

31. Henry James, *The Art of Fiction,* quoted in Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 148.

32. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 157.

what is there, with imagination and feeling."[33] Correspondingly, the moral thrust of novels does not primarily hinge on "the learning of rules and principles." Rather, a "large part of learning takes place in the experience of the concrete. This experiential learning, in turn, requires the cultivation of perception and responsiveness: the ability to read a situation, singling out what is relevant for thought and action." Nussbaum avidly contends that novels "exemplify and offer such [experimental] learning: exemplify it in the efforts of the character . . . , engender it in the reader by setting up a similarly complex activity."[34]

To be sure, Nussbaum's emphasis on the "experience of the concrete" presents itself as a salient feature within the purview of her argumentation, which is directed "against the claim of general description, and supports the novelist's finely tuned . . . descriptions as providing more of what is morally relevant."[35] Unsurprisingly, such pronounced skepticism toward formulas, rules, and principles evoked some discontent, such as that articulated by Hilary Putnam, who charged Nussbaum's model of a "morality of perception, which is also a morality of tender attention toward particulars" with being "dangerously lacking in general rule-guided toughness."[36] This reservation, which appears forceful especially if seen in the light of the requirements of public political life, was addressed in Nussbaum's 1995 *Poetic Justice,* where she ponders the "characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination" and investigates "the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given the changes in circumstance, be oneself."[37] Echoing Rorty's interest in an "imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers," Nussbaum emphasizes:

> Novels (at least realist novels of the sort I shall consider) present persistent forms of human need . . . realized in specific social situations. These situations frequently . . . differ a good deal from the reader's own. Novels, recognizing this . . . construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them.[38]

33. Ibid., 152.

34. Ibid., 44.

35. Ibid., 165. "Situations are all highly concrete, and they do not present themselves with duty labels on them. Without the abilities of perception, duty is blind and therefore powerless," Nussbaum writes. She elaborates: "Obtuseness is a moral failing; its opposite can be cultivated. By themselves, trusted for and in themselves, the standing terms are a recipe for obtuseness" (156). In the words of Aristotle, to respond "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is appropriate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence" (*Nicomachean Ethics,* quoted in Nussbaum, 156).

36. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 198; and Hilary Putnam, "Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum," *New Literary History* 15 (1983): 193–200.

37. Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 3, 5. See also Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair,* 39.

38. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice,* 7.

What—parenthetically concealed—almost escapes attention here merely constitutes the beginning of a series of issues arising from Nussbaum's particular version of an ethics of literature: why does she restrict her argument to novels, and why only "*realist* novels"? Would not less "realism" entail more of a promise of liberation from society's established "refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion"?[39] Even if realist novels are deemed more amenable to a project of forming social "bonds of identification and sympathy" than, say, a Dada *lautgedicht,* why not plays, biographies, or histories?[40] Why, above all, not, as Henry James's Lambert Strether says, "poor dear old life?"[41] And further questions arise: What, for example, are we to make of the oddly dichotomic discourse imbuing Nussbaum's elaborations according to which "imagination and feeling" are linked to the reading of novels and, as such, contrasted with the more rationalistic thrust of philosophical "rules and principles"?[42] How viable is this distinction really, and how much does it serve Nussbaum's project, which sets out to undermine the oppositioning of literature and philosophy?[43]

While Nussbaum leaves these questions unanswered, she does offer one of the most elaborate accounts regarding the debate of how literature furthers our understanding of ethics. In so doing, she markedly exemplifies "the literary turn in contemporary, especially Anglo-American, philosophy—most pointedly articulated in Rorty's 'general turn against theory and toward narrative,'" which, as Michael Eskin notes, "can be viewed as a homologous response to the putative formalism of analytical moral theory in favor of a more Aristotelian—eudemonistic and aretaic—approach to human existence as it is played out by singular persons in specific situations, which are, so the claim goes, best illuminated in and through works of literature."[44] As indicated, moral philosophy's turn to narrative in general and literature in particular conversely corresponds to a certain turn to ethics in literary studies, which has been read as a "reaction against the [putative] formalism . . . of deconstruction,"[45] and as "the growing influence of such thinkers as Emmanuel Levinas—especially in the wake of the 'de Man controversy' in the late 1980s."[46] Moreover, it has been related "to broader institutional developments, such as the 'continuing power of feminist criticism and theory and the rising influence of

39. Ibid., xvii.

40. See Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 45.

41. *The Ambassadors,* quoted in Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 45. For a penetrating critique of Nussbaum's approach, see Charles Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience," in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory,* ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Viriginia, 2001), 30–58.

42. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 152, 44.

43. For an insightful discussion of the last two questions, see Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 35–60, here, 57f.

44. Eskin, introduction, 558.

45. James Phelan, "Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading," in Davis and Womack, *Mapping the Ethical Turn,* 93–109, here 107, quoted in Eskin, introduction, 558.

46. Eskin, introduction, 558.

African American, [postcolonial,] multicultural and queer criticism and theory, all of which ground themselves in sets of ethico-political commitments.'"[47] To be sure, the vicissitudes described here as literature's turn to (moral) philosophy and (moral) philosophy's turn to literature rely on a dichotomy of literature and philosophy that is as strategically helpful as it is methodologically problematic. "I do not deny that there are differences . . . between philosophy and literature . . . ; I am suggesting that we do not understand these differences,"[48] Stanley Cavell once wrote. Decades after Cavell articulated his unease, and without intending to "solve" the case, I hope to explore the relation between philosophy and literature with regard to our focal theme of "ethics," to put in my two cents, if only obliquely. Having outlined three influential positions in the "literature and ethics debate" assumed by philosophers, and having left off with Nussbaum's renowned account, we thus shall now direct our attention to contributions put forth by prominent literary critics, commencing with Wayne Booth.

Literary Studies' Turn to Ethics

It appears safe to say that Martha Nussbaum would deem herself a "friend" of Booth's capacious *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), according to whose central metaphor "a relationship with a literary work . . . is a kind of friendship."[49] Booth's conception of ethical criticism is, as Nussbaum points out, remarkably "broad and flexible,"[50] including "the entire range of effects on the 'character' or 'person' or 'self.' 'Moral' judgments are only a small part of it."[51] Booth's response to the question of "how art and ethics . . . should be joined or separated" develops along two trajectories. His first aim is "to restore the full intellectual legitimacy of our commonsense inclination to talk about stories in ethical terms, treating the characters in them and their makers as more like people than labyrinths, enigmas, or textual puzzles to be deciphered." Second, Booth aspires "to 'relocate' ethical criticism, turning it from flat judgment for or against supposedly stable works to fluid conversation about the qualities of the company we keep—and the company that we ourselves provide." Such hoped-for fluidity, Booth emphasizes, is at odds with preconceived ethical theorems: "What I mean by the ethical criticism of narrative . . . cannot be nicely confined in any preliminary definition; it will be shown more by what I do than by anything I say."[52] The performative

47. Phelan, "Sethe's Choice," 107, quoted in Eskin, introduction, 558.

48. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), xviii.

49. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 231.

50. Ibid., 22 n. 36.

51. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 8.

52. Ibid., ix, x, 8.

power of "ethical criticism" called on here reverberates with the professed "reformatting" of the reader while reading invoked by Nussbaum.[53] It defies the determination of "rules either for what we aim to become or for the discrimination we must 'practice' on the 'way.' We seek to practice a practice, to follow a way of ways, and—as Heidegger stresses—we can never precisely *say* what the practice or way might be."[54] What, in a Boothian vein, we perhaps *can* say is what the practice or way might be like: "trust"-worthy,[55] worthy of our "assent,"[56] indeed "desirable."[57] States Booth: "What we seek . . . will not be words or propositions in isolation . . . but the total pattern of desires . . . that the author commits us to." The "ethical pluralism" surfacing here leaves it "to each reader to practice an ethics of reading that might determine just which . . . standards should count most, and just which of the world's narratives should now be banned or embraced."[58] Thus Booth challenges MacIntyre's position, "insisting in effect that narrative is not a unifying factor but a kind of discursive shrine to 'pluralism,'" and that, accordingly, "the ethics of narrative consist not in a gathering together of disparate elements, but rather in an expansion of human possibilities."[59]

While both Nussbaum and Booth are primarily interested in the link between ethics and literature, our second example of literary studies' turn to ethics, Tobin Siebers, in his 1988 *Ethics of Criticism,* expressly directs attention to the "interference between ethics and criticism."[60] His study explores "how a particular theory or school of literary criticism has justified in an ethical way its theoretical choices." The declared aim of this investigation is a more nuanced understanding of the "impact of theoretical choice on the relation between literature and the lives of human beings." Siebers's concern with the relations between literature and human life as well as the respective role of criticism emerges against the backdrop of a broader concern, namely the efficacy of language as an "instrument of human violence." Accordingly, he argues that "literary critics have a responsibility not only to supervise their own . . . practices as critics but to think about the way in which language carries on the work of human prejudice, racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism. Even the most ethically oriented critics must remain watchful in this regard." In order to elucidate the interrelatedness of ethics and criticism, Siebers provides "an overview of some case histories," including Plato, Aristotle, Kant, the Romantics, Nietzsche, Julia Kristeva, Northrop Frye, and J. Hillis Miller.[61] The intention behind this "necessarily incomplete overview" is to expose "how the critical enters the

53. On this correspondence, see Harpham, "Ethics and Literary Criticism," 379.
54. Booth, *Company We Keep,* 266.
55. Ibid., 32 n. 6.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 269–70.
58. Ibid., 396, 489.
59. Harpham, "Ethics and Literary Criticism," 379–80.
60. Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 18.
61. Ibid., 2, 7f., 18; see 14–43.

ethical, how the ethical enters the critical, and how each has tried through various means to rid itself of the other." "As it stands," Siebers states, "modern criticism has lost its sense of purpose. Perhaps its greatest failing has been its refusal to judge the difference between literature and life, for this activity is the definite characteristic of criticism." It is here, then, "in the space between literature and life," that Siebers situates the practice of literary criticism: "Criticism needs . . . to admit its role as a mediator between life and literature and to accept the ethical responsibilities of its judgments in both domains."[62]

The evident problem with Siebers's approach lies, as commentators have pointed out, in his unspecified employment of such concepts as "human," "humanity," "human life," "human activity," and so on. Already at the outset Siebers declares that "literature is a human activity, and the character of criticism must remain as resolutely human." This precariously sentimental approach abounds in such concluding sentences as "To be human is to tell stories about ourselves and other human beings. The finally human is literature."[63] Precisely because Siebers problematizes the ways in which language perpetuates classism, sexism, nationalism, racism, and so forth, we are perplexed at the ease with which he passes over differences of class, sex, nation, et cetera so as to bring a formulaic notion like "the human" to bear.[64] In the light of such missing differentiation of his categories, Siebers leaves many questions as to what an ethics of criticism could consist of or might involve. At the same time, what distinguishes his approach from those of both Nussbaum and Booth, who are primarily interested in the ethical ramifications of literature, is a distinct sensitivity to the ethical valences of the practice of literary criticism itself.

Such sensitivity to the ethical valences of criticism finds a prominent proponent in J. Hillis Miller, who rearticulates the relation between ethics and aesthetics with regard to questions of *reading*. "In what sense," his 1987 *Ethics of Reading* starts out, "can or should the act of reading be itself ethical or have an ethical import?"[65] Conventionally, reading is thought of as "primarily cognitive," as a matter of understanding, which may or may not turn out to be of some ethical use that, in turn, would be considered "extraneous to the primary act of reading." By contrast, Miller argues that "there is a necessary ethical moment in that act of reading *as such,* a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical." This proposition is undergirded in the course of a

62. Ibid., 18, 41f.

63. Ibid., 12, 239f.

64. See James Phelan, review of *The Ethics of Criticism,* by Tobin Siebers, *Modern Philology* 87.4 (1990): 435–38, here 437. No less of a concern, Phelan points out, is Siebers's employment of ethically charged categories such as "equality," "justice," and "violence." Does not Siebers's book, Phelan asks, "with its championing of equality and its condemnation of violence through appeals to an undefined, undifferentiated 'humanity,' simply serve the dominant liberal . . . ideology and thereby preserve a status quo in which equality is a joke and violence a commonplace?" (437).

65. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 1.

two-stage argumentation. First, Miller submits that the ethics of reading ensues *not* from the fact that "stories contain the thematic dramatization of ethical situations, choices, and judgments" but rather from a certain condition according to which "ethics itself has a peculiar relation to that form of language we call narrative."[66] "If there is to be such a thing as an ethical moment in the act of reading," Miller elaborates,

> it must be *sui generis,* something individual and particular, itself a source of political or cognitive acts, not subordinated to them. The flow of power must not be all in one direction. There must be an influx of performative power from the linguistic transaction involved in the act of reading into the realms of knowledge, politics, and history. Literature must be in some way a cause and not merely an effect.[67]

Put differently, literature is not merely a reflection *of* history; it also, and perhaps primarily, responds *to* history by generating its own speaking power and by mobilizing its own ethical force. Hence, Miller suggests that "the ethical moment in reading . . . enters into the social, institutional, political realms." Indeed, "the rhetorical study of literature has crucial practical implications for our moral, social, and political lives."[68]

This first stage of Miller's argument is followed by a more intricate and also more enigmatic second stage, and we shall focus on it in more detail, as it will prove valuable in situating my own understanding of the relation between ethics and narration. In order to solidify his initial claim that "there is a necessary ethical moment in that act of reading *as such,*" Miller elaborates on a well-known paradox discussed in Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals:*

> Respect for the law, says Kant, is like fear in that we recognize the law as *necessary,* unavoidable. In this the law is like, say, some natural catastrophe that we fear. The law is something we are subject to whether we like it or not. We accept the law, *necessarily,* without consulting that most basic of motives, self-love. Respect for the law, on the other hand, is also analogous to inclination in that we impose the law *freely* on ourselves. We really want to obey the law. . . . Since the law is a law for ourselves, it is something we impose *freely* on ourselves as reasonable beings. . . . "I *freely* impose the moral law on myself, though at the same time I respect its absolute *necessity.* I *freely* impose the moral law on myself, as a law for myself, out of respect for the law, and in respecting the law I respect myself as a *free* rational self able to have respect for the law and able to act ethically on the basis of the law."[69]

66. Ibid., 1, italics mine; 3.
67. Ibid., 5, italics mine.
68. Ibid., 4, 40.
69. Ibid., 21f., italics mine.

Miller now stages a dialogue between this paradoxical Kantian notion of ethics and the act of reading, arriving at the following exposition on what an ethics of reading could amount to: "By 'the ethics of reading,'" he notes, "I mean that aspect of the act of reading in which there is a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and *free,* in the sense that *I must take responsibility* for my response and for the further effects, 'interpersonal,' institutional, social, political, or historical, of my act of reading."[70] The opacity of this paradoxical formulation comes at a high price to those trying to make sense of Miller's remarks. Just how are we to understand this "freedom" that *requires* ("I must") us to "take responsibility"? How can I, as reader, be held responsible for something that I don't choose to do but that instead is inflicted on me? "In order to make sense of this," writes Derek Attridge, one of Miller's most astute commentators,

> we have to have recourse to a different understanding of responsibility, and therefore a different sense of ethics, one not tied to freedom of choice. One such understanding would be Levinas's sense of the ethical demand of the other, a demand we cannot escape by saying "I didn't *choose* to come face to face with this person or this situation." For Levinas, ethics lies not in the responsibility implicit in my freely chosen acts but in the responsibility I find myself gripped by, "taken hostage" by.[71]

There indeed appears to be a productive resemblance between this Levinasian notion of "freedom" that only allows me "to acknowledge or deny the ethical force that already binds me" and the paradoxical Millerian conception of a reader who has to acknowledge the responsibility for his response even though he acts in response to an "implacable necessity." Time and again, Miller insists that "each reading is, strictly speaking, ethical, in the sense that it *has* to take place, by an *implacable necessity,* as the response to a categorical demand, and in the sense that the reader *must* take responsibility for its consequences in the personal, social, and political worlds." Correspondingly, he concludes: "The endpoint of my exploration of the ethics of reading . . . is the strange and difficult notion that reading is subject not to the text as its law, but to the law of which the text is subject. This law forces the reader to betray the text or deviate from it in the act of reading it, in the name of a higher demand that can yet be reached only by way of the text."[72]

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70. Ibid., 43, italics mine.

71. Derek Attridge, "Miller's Tale," in *The J. Hillis Miller Reader,* ed. Julian Wolfreys (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 78–82, here 80.

72. Miller, *Ethics of Reading,* 59, italics mine; 120. "The imperative of reading," as Simon Critchley paraphrases, "is not simply (but is it ever simple?) fidelity to the text as if it were one's law, but rather a *fidelity to the law to which the text is subject.* This law is the matter of . . . reading, which entails that the reader *should* betray the text that is being read in the name of the law to which that text is subject" (Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* [Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992], 46). Or, as Attridge extrapolates, "I, as responsible reader, am not . . . seeking to reveal an unchanging core of meaning, the text's 'secret' in the conventional sense of an unrecoverable interior, but rather attempting to

It goes without saying that the idiosyncrasy characterizing Miller's take on the relation between ethics and narration places him at a distance from most of the approaches discussed thus far. Martha Nussbaum epitomizes perhaps the most clearly identifiable theoretical antipode to Miller.[73] Whereas Nussbaum conceives of a reader who empathizes with literary characters' hopes, fears, worries, and concerns, and who learns "to form bonds of identification and sympathy," she wastes no time with the *materiality of the texts* under discussion, effectively reducing the fabric of literature to the role of an invisible transmitting device. Yet it is precisely here, in the crevices and chasms of textual constructs, that Miller locates the point of departure for his investigation into the ethics of reading.[74] Whereas Nussbaum remains blind to the workings of language, its rhetorical efficacy and allegorical force, Miller (with, in the words of Barbara Johnson, "rigorous unreliability")[75] appears crucially concerned with the narrative economy of the texts he discusses. To be sure, Miller's fixation with "language"—as opposed to "extralinguistic forces and facts"[76]—deeply confounded a great number of critics, including Tobin Siebers, who called Miller's project "absurd" and characterized it as "the creation of an isolated linguistic morality [which] robs ethical theory of its social context and renders ethics ineffectual."[77] It has been argued that for Miller, "ethics becomes just the name for a certain, albeit highly sophisticated, practice of reading,"[78] one that does not acknowledge the world's "'thickness,'" that "extra-linguistic basis with which we must engage."[79] Such "thickness of the world" would undoubtedly appear pivotal to Alasdair MacIntyre, who, in *After Virtue,* notes that virtue "has to be expounded in terms of…the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition."[80] In turn, Miller's work appears to be more congenial to a position such as that put forth by Richard Rorty, who, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,*

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perform, here and now, an affirmation of its singularity and alterity—a different kind of secret that cannot simply be revealed. If this performative response is to do justice to the singularity of the text…it must itself be singular and inventive—not merely an act of obedience to a law. It must…be irresponsible as well as responsible.…In exercising our freedom to tell stories about the text…we are obeying the text's injunction: be responsible in your irresponsibility, tell my secrets with as much care and respect as you can even though you know they will remain secret, let my inventiveness be validated in your inventiveness" ("Miller's Tale," 81).

73. See also Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism,* 92–94.

74. "Where for Nussbaum," Robert Eaglestone astutely notes, "narratives enact and reflect back on ethical rules, for Miller, ethical or moral rules themselves can only exist in narrative form" (*Ethical Criticism,* 68).

75. Barbara Johnson, A *World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 17, quoted in Lawrence Buell, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Ethics," in *The Return to Ethics,* ed. Marjorie Garber et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–13, here 4.

76. J. Hillis Miller, "Is There an Ethics of Reading?" in *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology,* ed. James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 79–101, here 81.

77. Siebers, *Ethics of Criticism,* 39.

78. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 165; after Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism,* 80.

79. Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism,* 81.

80. MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 139.

claimed "that the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, that we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called 'fact.'"[81]

It is against this backdrop that we might have to question the thus far established framework regarding the conjunction of ethics and aesthetics, as it relies on a rather technical juxtaposition of philosophy (MacIntyre, Rorty, Nussbaum) and literary studies (Booth, Siebers, Miller). A possibly more genuine way of reflecting on the authors treated so far (and, concomitantly, of positioning my own approach) might be to ask whether ethics is problematized within the traditional purview of thematic negotiation (as is the case in MacIntyre, Rorty, Nussbaum, Booth, and Siebers) or whether the actual mechanics of language, its narrative infrastructure and figurative repercussions, are given serious consideration (as is the case in Miller) to the point where ethics may no longer translate into more or less congealed themes and positions. "Nussbaum does not find the textuality of texts problematic," Robert Eaglestone appositely remarks; "for her a text can be a direct lesson in morals or, as Henry James would say, an experiment in life.... This is epi-reading on a grand scale: literature becomes no more than a cipher, an example for philosophy, a heuristic testing ground for ideas.... Despite Nussbaum's protests to the contrary, she dissolves literature into philosophy."[82] This is a charge that, as indicated above, could similarly be held against Rorty. While it seems that for Nussbaum "ethical positions shine through [language] like light through a perfect window,"[83] the same holds true, to different degrees, for MacIntyre, Booth, and Siebers. What distinguishes Miller from these thinkers is precisely that he is deeply immersed in the architectonics of language, as he deems ethics an inherent (rather than exterior) feature of narrative structures.

Given certain correspondences between Miller's approach and my own, we shall, without digressing, delve yet a little further into *The Ethics of Reading* and spell out some crucial parallels and especially discrepancies between Miller's understanding of the relation between ethics and narration, and my own. The first claim in Miller's two-step argumentation, we noted, is that the status of ethics in literature is not merely that of "thematic reflection" or "passive mirroring" (as exemplified by Nussbaum), and I unequivocally share Miller's assumption that there is "an ethical dimension to the act of reading" that is *not* identical with the ethical themes in the works at issue. The more inscrutable second stage of Miller's argument pertains to the questions of *where* this nonthematic, nonrepresentational dimension of ethics might be located and *how* it might be configured. It is here that my concurrence with Miller falters and that important dissimilarities surge to the surface. Miller says that he is trying to shift "from the thematic representation of

81. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* 20. See Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism,* 82.
82. Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism,* 92.
83. Ibid., 94.

ethical issues within a work of literature to the ethical issues involved in the act of reading itself." I too try to shift from the thematic representation of ethical issues (including totalitarian politics, questions of violence and terrorism) within works to the ethical issues involved in the act of reading itself. Says Miller: "I get my tip for what to do as a result of reading *What Maisie Knew* not from *What Maisie Knew* itself, but from my access, through it, to the unformulatable law it exemplifies through narration." In our case too the act of *reading* forms the basis of an ethics—a "literary ethics," which, I shall suggest, might at its heart always be an "ethics of reading." Yet just what are we to make of the "unformulatable law" that Miller seeks access to, this law that appears to constitute the centerpiece of his theorization of the relation between ethics and narration? Miller maintains that we "*must respond* to the *linguistic imperative* which is the *true* ethics of reading. Some ethical decision and act follows as an *irresistible necessity whenever I read.*"[84] This insistence on an overpowering "linguistic imperative" and the corresponding "irresistible necessity whenever I read" appears oddly nebulous and demarcates the moment at which my own project diverges from Miller's.

Whereas Miller stresses the "*irrelevance* of the thematic assertions of even the most apparently morally concerned literature" to the question of ethics (in light of that overwhelming "unformulatable law"), my focus is directed toward an ethics of reading that is emphatically invested in a work's ethical themes while examining those themes in terms of their unique interplay with particular modes of presentation and, respectively, the oddly elusive ethical force emanating from that interplay. Such a force is not one that *categorically* comes into being "whenever I read" (as with Miller) but is obliquely tied to and contingent on the ethical issues discussed within a text. Hence, I am not merely asking *what* kind of ethically concerned statements a text brings about (Nussbaum), nor am I probing some sort of ethical energy that, irrespective of the text at issue, originates in the "act of reading *as such*" (Miller).[85] My attention lies rather with how both of these dimensions interrelate with a third dimension (one that Miller is greatly concerned with without, however, conceptually spelling it out), namely the dimension of "form." We thus shall further explore the so far underexposed dimension of "form" and its relation to the act of reading. Developing this link will likely clarify my treatment of ethics as put forth in this book.

"Textual Otherness"

Among the established analyses of the relation between form and the act of reading, Derek Attridge's work, culminating in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), presents a particularly nuanced case. Attridge suggests that "the distinctive ethical

84. Miller, "Is There an Ethics of Reading?" 81; 84; 87; 98; 99, italics mine.
85. Miller, *Ethics of Reading,* 98, italics mine; 99; 1, italics mine.

force of literature inheres not in the fictional world portrayed but in the handling of language whereby that fictional world is brought into being."[86] While Attridge, like Miller (and I), apparently does not direct the attention to the "portrayal" or depiction or representation of ethical issues (as does Nussbaum), the question arises, In what way does he deem "the handling of language" conducive to the coming into being of that "distinctive ethical force of literature"? "Literary works that resist the immediacy and transparency of language," Attridge argues, "engage the reader ethically; and to do justice to such works as a reader is to respond fully to an event whereby otherness challenges habitual norms."[87] The interrelatedness of the two levels evoked here—the level of form and the level of the act of reading—lies at the center of Attridge's approach. Time and again, he accentuates the importance of the latter of these two dimensions, the act of reading. "There are grounds for arguing," writes Attridge, "that the most fundamental engagement between the literary and the ethical occurs not in the human world depicted in works of literature but in the very act of reading such works, whether or not they deal with situations and relations that could be called ethical."[88] Undoubtedly, these lines recall Miller's claim regarding the "*irrelevance* of the thematic assertions of even the most apparently morally concerned literature" to the question of ethics,[89] as well his corresponding insistence on "an ethical dimension to the act of reading" itself,[90] an indebtedness Attridge readily acknowledges.[91] Asking how, then, a work of art implicates the reader ethically, Attridge elaborates:

> There is . . . an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification, and there is also a sense in which the formally innovative work, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the most sharply challenging . . . ethical demand. Formal innovation (of the sort that matters in literature) is a testing of the operations of meaning, and is therefore a kind of ethical experimentation. To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand how little you understand me, translate my untranslatability.[92]

86. Derek Attridge, "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction," *Poetics Today* 25.4 (2004): 653–71, here 653.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Miller, "Is There an Ethics of Reading?" 98, italics mine.

90. Ibid., 84.

91. See Attridge, "Ethical Modernism," 653 n. 1; Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 143f.

92. Attridge, *Singularity of Literature,* 130f. Attridge's call, according to which we ought to "respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other" of course resonates with the philosophy of Levinas, to whom Attridge frequently (if only selectively [see 141]) refers: "Levinas writes of the relation to the other as that of hostage to captor, emphasizing the randomness with which I feel myself summoned by the other—not because I am who I am but because I happen to be in a particular place and time. But the other is also vulnerable, in need of my protection, 'destitute,' to use Levinas's word.

Attridge here associates aesthetic "estrangement" with a work's "ethical demand," "formal innovation" with "ethical experimentation." Indeed, he argues that "it is in literature's *resistance* to the demands of . . . moral exemplification that it most distinctively engages with the ethical, and a critical practice that aims to be responsive to the ethics of literature . . . needs to take account of that resistance."[93] Unlike Nussbaum, whose concern appears primarily to lie with the ethical issues discussed on the level of thematic discourse, Attridge contends that "it is less a question of something we can learn than something that happens to us and through us as we read. . . . The distinctiveness of the ethical in literature, and in artworks more generally, is that it occurs as an *event* in the process of reading, not a theme to be registered, a thesis to be grasped, or an imperative to be followed or ignored."[94] Given this event-like occurrence of the artwork as perceived in the act of reading, Attridge puts forth the following suggestion as to what being a responsible reader might amount to:

> What I wish to argue is that doing justice to a literary work *as* a literary work (and there are many other valid ways of responding to literature) means doing justice to its *otherness:* to whatever it is about it that challenges our preferences and preconceptions, that stretches our powers of thought and feeling, that resists the encompassing grasp of our interpretive techniques. The otherness of the work is inseparable from . . . what we respond to when we feel that the work we are reading . . . is unlike any other.[95]

It is in this vein that Attridge elaborates: "If all literary works—a category which does not, for the purpose of this argument, include all works conventionally classed as 'literature' and does not exclude works not so classed—are characterized by their otherness, . . . their ethical significance does not depend on the representations of otherness which they may or may not contain."[96] Their "ethical significance" rather appears to be contingent on

> a recognition (whatever its writers may have thought they were doing) that literature's distinctive power and potential ethical force resides in a testing and unsettling of deeply held assumptions of transparency, instrumentality, and direct

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Its power lies in its weakness. Literature, for all the force which it is capable of exercising, can achieve nothing without readers—responsible readers" (131). See also Zahi Zalloua's interview with Attridge, "Derek Attridge on the Ethical Debates in Literary Studies," *SubStance* 38.3 (2009): 18–30. Regarding the precarious leap from the Levinasian encounter with another human being to the encounter with a work of art, see Attridge, *Singularity of Literature,* 17–34 and 126–28; Eaglestone, *Ethial Criticism,* 129–74; Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

93. Attridge, "Ethical Modernism," 654.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid., 654f.

> referentiality.... The effect is one that I would want to describe as textual otherness, or *textualterity:* a verbal artifact that estranges as it entices... that speaks while it says that it must remain silent—and in so doing stages the ethical as an event.[97]

Attridge's elegant prose might be found to enact the "otherness" it discusses; "otherness" at times seems "engaged, staged, distanced, embraced... in the rupturing of narrative discourse, in the lasting uncertainties of reference."[98] And yet, just what are we to make of this incessantly employed term "otherness" that, more often than not, appears to assume the status of a concept and as such to contradict all that it presumably seeks to evoke. To be sure, Attridge spares no effort in relativizing and justifying his use of the expression. Accentuating, for instance, the constitutive force of the act of reading in relation to a work's "formal" specificity, he remarks: "Otherness, as I have stressed, is a strictly relative term—otherness is always otherness to an existing subjectivity or state of affairs."[99] "*Only in relating to me* is the other other, and its otherness is registered in the adjustments I have to make in order to acknowledge it."[100] These, like many similar sentences, evince a continuous (and perhaps deliberate) reifying spin characterizing Attridge's use of the term "otherness" that gives it gravity while appearing to be at odds with what the other, in its defiance of epistemic appropriation and instrumentalization, is meant to invoke.

While this essentially terminological issue is one that Attridge himself problematizes at length and indeed turns into an effective basis for further theorization,[101] the difference between Attridge's focus and my own lies elsewhere, in the significance attributed to the level of thematic discussion. As indicated, Attridge asks a question Miller already asked (and one I myself will ask in each of the chapters of this book), namely, Does the "ethical force" of certain works "lie in something other than the moral and political critique they ostensibly offer?"[102] His response (much like my own) revolves around the interrelation of "formal" idiosyncrasy and readerly engagement, as it is here that the distinct ethical force of literature (its "textual otherness, or textualterity")[103] is brought into being. Notably, Attridge calls this very distinction into question insofar as that which he describes as "the otherness of the literary work" is "experienced as an *event* by the reader, not as some quality"—which is why he speaks of "the event that used to be called 'form.'"[104] Yet as we found to be the case with Miller, so in Attridge the genuine "ethical significance" of literature appears programmatically dissociated from the "representation" of

97. Ibid., 669.
98. Ibid., 670.
99. Attridge, *Singularity of Literature,* 43.
100. Ibid., 30.
101. See Attridge, *Singularity of Literature,* 17–34; Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," *PMLA* 114.1 (1999): 20–31.
102. Attridge, "Ethical Modernism," 657.
103. Ibid., 669.
104. Ibid., 655, italics mine; 670.

ethically charged matters.[105] And it is, once again, this structural disregard for or operational differentiation of a work's thematic discussion that distinguishes my approach from Attridge's. To be sure, Attridge concedes that a work expressly concerned with ethical issues may in fact "raise an interesting question":

> How does the staging of otherness with the fictional world relate to the work's own otherness, as experienced by the reader? Are the ethical demands played out within the work's imagined universe given peculiar intensity when the work itself makes demands as an other? And conversely, is the otherness of the literary work . . . more powerfully felt as an ethical force when it is in the service of a represented encounter with alterity?[106]

While literary works' ethically concerned themes or theses might add an "interesting" dimension to their "ethical significance," such "ethical significance does *not*" (to quote an already-quoted sentence) "*depend* on the representations of otherness which they may or may not contain."[107] Ethically concerned themes, according to Attridge, might well affect the question of a work's ethical import, but they remain (as with Miller) inessential, peripheral, extraneous, to what he describes as a "work's *own* otherness" as experienced by the reader.[108] In contrast, my focus is directed toward an ethics of reading integrally (rather than merely extraneously) invested in a work's ethical themes; consequently, each of my readings revolves around particular poetic enactments and the explicitly thematized ethical models *to which they respond*. My attention lies with the interdependence of ethically charged propositions and their performative enactment, morally motivated constatives and their idiosyncratic presentational manifestation as perceived in the act of reading. In each chapter, I tackle the singularly negotiated nexus of variously configured ethical "messages" vis-à-vis the particular mediatic moves by which they find themselves challenged and thwarted—an ethics of the singular that I shall now try to delineate.

Prolegomena to a "Literary Ethics"

An ethics of the singular as emerging from the singular interrelatedness of ethically concerned statements and their specific poetic enactments is always and primarily a "literary ethics." It is a literary ethics not because it is concerned with works of "literature," an attribute that, in the context of this book, would apply only to Kafka

105. Ibid., 654.
106. Ibid., 655.
107. Ibid., 654f., italics mine.
108. Ibid., 655, italics mine.

and Müller.[109] What characterizes a literary ethics, rather, pertains to certain literary, filmic, or, more generally, poetic qualities, qualities that figure in "aesthetically mediated artifacts" and as such come into view only in the context of an analysis or reading that insistently focuses on the poetic moments of a text.[110] Such poetic moments of course abound in works of art such as Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," Müller's *Germania Death in Berlin,* or the film *Germany in Autumn;* yet they also surface in self-consciously "writerly" works such as those by Benjamin and Arendt scrutinized in this study. Hence, and in the light of such literary qualities, a "literary ethics" is always inherently related to the act of reading and perhaps, indeed, is to be thought of as an "ethics of reading." What, then, connects the various readings performed in this book, what ties them together and delineates their common features, what, in other words, constitutes the consistency of a model of "literary ethics," is always related to the (broadly conceived) "literary" qualities of a work in conjunction with my readerly encounter with and attentiveness to them.

These two moments—the moment of textual materiality as well as the moment of readerly response—demarcate the two poles between which a literary ethics comes into being. Everything I say in this book has to do with the way in which the details of the texts, their particular modes of performance, the question of *how* they are structured, determine their ethical "position" (for lack of a better word). The ethics generated by writers like Benjamin (whose thinking is profoundly embedded in the way in which he writes) or Arendt are, I contend, at cross-purposes to a list of fixed ideas and at odds with recognizable positions that might be allied with any school of philosophical thought on the matter. Concomitantly, what I say about ethics in Benjamin or Arendt, of course, also results from my very own readerly engagement with these thinkers' works.[111] Indeed, there is a long tradition in the second half of the twentieth century of authors (including Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Barbara Johnson, Carol Jacobs, and others) taking up various ethical, political, and social issues, often by way of literature and film. What unites these authors is that they all work through at times highly ambiguous texts to come to their arguments. They all *read* texts in order to "arrive" at what they have to say. Or, conversely, while one might aspire to develop a catalog of insights and positions that come out of their readings, what *does* come out of their readings, in the end, is precisely that one has to *read.*

109. On the intricate question of what constitutes "the literary," see Attridge, *Singularity of Literature,* 86f.

110. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the expression "aesthetically mediated artifacts."

111. My reading, like any act of reading, results, to a greater or lesser degree, from a paradoxical situation, in which I seek to be "faithful" to the text by embracing it in its particularity and specificity, while hoping to remain "faithful" to myself, to my own creativity and my concrete situation as reader at this particular time and place in history. For a careful discussion of this paradox, see Attridge, *Singularity of Literature,* 89–92.

If the propensity among Neo-Aristotelian critics such as Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Richard Rorty was to reduce literary works to moral philosophy,[112] then a "literary ethics," as understood here, directs attention to that figurative dimension that typically finds itself thwarted, kindly dismissed, or simply annulled in philosophical analyses. A literary ethics describes, within the purview of the steadfast ductus of conceptional ethics, a syncope, a moment of disruption, that challenges the meter of ethical discourses and the directives and doctrines ensuing from them.[113] As such, a literary ethics springs from specific, poetically precipitated, textual interstices and seizes its force from the fact that it posits no general and predictable but singular and unpredictable, indeed, unprecedented moments of interference—a seditious perturbance to established ethical systems of thought. A literary ethics presents, beyond any preconceived notion of ethics, the actuality of a relentlessly defiant ethical thrust, of ethical effects that, strictly speaking, elide any sort of epistemic appropriation, remain strange, strangely foreign, obstinately reluctant to be subsumed under given concepts and conceptions precisely because they cannot, in their singularity, quite be conceived *like* anything else,[114] effects that, audaciously and aporetically, no doubt, lay claim to their inconceivability.

112. See also Zalloua, "Derek Attridge on the Ethical Debates," 22.

113. The individual readings performed in Carol Jacob's *Skirting the Ethical* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008) would be exemplary in this respect.

114. To briefly spell out the etymological relation between the words employed—*concept, conceive,* and *conception:* (1) The noun *concept* derives from Latin *conceptum,* "(a thing) conceived," the past participle of Latin *concipere, "*to take effectively, take to oneself, take in and hold.*"* (2) The verb *conceive* can be traced back to the Old French word *concevoir,* which, again, derives from Latin *concipere.* (3) Finally, the word *conception* denotes "the action of conceiving," from Old French *concepcion* and, respectively, Latin *conceptionem,* which, once again, derives from Latin *concipere (OED*). In short, *concept, conceive,* and *conception* can all be traced back to the Latin verb *concipere.* These etymological interrelations merely elucidate what has already emerged in the context of our argumentation, namely that that which defies being subsumed under any *concept* or *conception* is, strictly speaking, in-*conceivable*—such as the ethical effects at issue in this book.

Inconceivable Effects