

CONTROVERSY

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Redefining Ethical Criticism

The Old vs. the New

1. Ethical Criticism's Fall and Postmodernism's Rise

For roughly 2500 years, ethical references constituted the starting point (and often the ending point) for most literary commentary. From Plato's attack on tragedy up through the Victorians' scandalized indignation over the work of Oscar Wilde and the Pre-Raphaelite poets, ethical criticism was the default position for most critics of literary art. However, like many long-lived positions not kept intellectually honest by ongoing criticism, ethical criticism over the centuries got fat, lazy, repetitive, shallow, doctrinaire, self-indulgent, platitudinous, and sometimes mean spirited.¹ By the end of the 19th century, ethical criticism's fatuity had brought it to the lip of the very cliff over which it was about to be pushed by a great many intellectual and societal forces that it never saw coming. What began as a fairly local – that is, British – late 19th-century backlash against ethical criticism swelled throughout the 20th century into a tsunami of new ideas from all across Europe and America that swept ethical criticism away. At the academic and professional levels² ethical criti-

¹ Robert Buchanan's 1871 review of Daniel Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* sonnet sequence is a prime example. After quoting Rossetti's poem, »Nuptial Sleep«, Buchanan fumes thus: »Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness.« And then he hilariously adds, completely without irony, in the manner of the anti-Semite who hastens to assure you that »some of my best friends are Jews«, »We are no purists in this matter.« He then demonstrates his freedom from any »purist« bias by saying that the poem »is neither poetic, nor manly, nor even human. [...] It is simply nasty.« (ibid., 338) No wonder ethical criticism wound up being despised by artists and intellectuals. Elizabeth Rigby's 1848 attack on *Jane Eyre* is another prime example. »Altogether the autobiography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. [...] We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*.« (ibid., 91) No wonder ethical criticism had come to seem shrill, narrow minded, and mean spirited.

² Of course, ethical criticism went on merrily, or at least robustly and totally unimpeded in popular culture, as, indeed, it still does today. Two random examples caught my eye in a recent issue of *Rolling*

cism was killed, crushed, annihilated. I need to concede early on, however, that my own contribution here reflects on the critical debate about ethical criticism from a clearly Anglo-North-American perspective. As a consequence, some European positions go unmentioned (such as reception theory and hermeneutics). I am focusing on the history of and debate about ethical criticism that occurred mainly in England and America ranging from the late 19th-century to the present.

Persistently throughout the entire 20th century, the higher the prestige of other modes of criticism ascended – first, New Criticism, and, second, postmodernism³ – the lower the prestige of ethical criticism descended. Since, however, for today's disciplinarians even the history of this descent is hardly available, it may be useful here to string together a sketchy set of references to some of the most important 20th-century theories in criticism and philosophy that, in Cockney locution, ›did for‹ ethical criticism. The complete rout of such a centuries long mode as ethical criticism becomes intelligible only when one pulls all of these later views together and takes a moment to contemplate the credibility they claimed throughout most of the 20th century. These 20th-century theories did more than merely discredit ethical criticism of the arts; they tended to discredit ethics as a general human enterprise. I refer to such movements and theories as modernism⁴, logical positivism,⁵ the writings of Karl Marx,⁶ the cultural aftermath of World Wars One and Two,⁷ the 20th-

Stone. In Peter Travers's review of *Please Give*, a Nicole Holofcener film, Travers closes his commentary by saying, ›the pitch-perfect performances help Holofcener stir up feelings that cut to the heart of what defines an ethical life. There's no movie around right now with a subject more pertinent.« (2010, 74) In another review in the same issue, Travers judges Daniel Barber's *Harry Brown* to be a significantly inferior movie to Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* because ›Eastwood took on the moral issues that screenwriter Gary Young and first-time director Daniel Barber studiously avoid. It's the difference between riveting and repellent.« (ibid.) In this essay I intend to focus on the fate of ethical criticism inside the professional, intellectual, and academic domains, but the persistent robustness of ethical criticism in popular culture is relevant to the story I am telling here; I simply have neither space nor time here to pursue both lines of inquiry.

³ Throughout most of this paper I am going to use ›postmodernism‹ as a catch-all term for most of the critical approaches that dominated discourse during what many call, looking back, the ›turn to theory‹. It might be important in some contexts to make some discriminations among post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism, and I will make such discriminations when they are necessary, but, mostly, they will not be necessary in this essay.

⁴ Modernism as a 20th-century movement in the arts was driven in part by a strong desire to oppose all artistic expression that gave off even the slightest 19th-century odor of concern for respectability, propriety, and ethical complacency, and an equally strong desire to *do* art in any way that repudiated rather than replicated the stuffiness of Victorian moralism.

⁵ Logical positivism in philosophy asserted powerfully and repetitively that all language about arts and ethics was merely emotive, not referential, and that such language had therefore had no status as a basis for truth claims (Gregory 1998b; MacIntyre 1981).

⁶ Karl Marx's recorded his seminal claim in 1846 (although it was not published until 1932) that ›what [human beings] are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production. [...] Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.«

century elevation of scientific knowledge over humanistic inquiry,⁸ New Criticism,⁹ post-colonial studies,¹⁰ Freudianism,¹¹ deconstruction,¹² the work of Michel Foucault,¹³ anthropological relativism,¹⁴ changing views of human nature,¹⁵ and, finally, changing notions of truth.¹⁶

(406–409) This claim established a general perspective on human nature that over the course of the 20th century completely changed what ›human nature‹ came to mean. Looking at things from Marx's perspective, ›human nature‹ came to mean not a collection of capacities or traits or developmental imperatives inherent to the species, but a product of whatever cultural forces get to the organism first, especially the cultural forces buried in the structures of the means and production of material goods. The influence of this view – *human beings are products* of forces outside of them rather than shapers of those forces – cannot be overstated in its causal relationship to 20th-century developments in political theory, economic programs, social policies, national revolutions, and, of course, literary criticism.

⁷ The unprecedented ravages of World War One and the shock of the opening of the Holocaust camps at the end of World War Two, especially when viewed as the policies of men some of whom had been educated at the best universities in Europe, profoundly undermined for many people their previous belief in comfort giving ethical systems.

⁸ The growing prestige of science throughout the 20th century led to a correlative cultural conviction, at least in the West, that as scientific knowledge advanced, disciplines such as ethics and aesthetics would ultimately be reduced to predictable rules or behavioral protocols that could be totally explained and perhaps even be controlled or at least manipulated by science (Skinner 1971).

⁹ The aesthetic theories of the New Criticism that dominated critical discourse from the 1920s through the 1960s developed a powerful pedagogical dimension that swiftly worked its way down from graduate schools to colleges and then into high schools, and convinced thousands of literary scholars and teachers (who, in turn, convinced tens of thousands of students) that the only proper ground of artistic response is a kind of disinterested contemplativeness based on notions drawn largely from Kant's ideas as expressed in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), even though thousands of those promulgating this perspective had no idea of its Kantian origins.

¹⁰ Following World War Two and during the emergence of what people afterwards called ›the atomic age, virulent attacks, some of them well developed, were repeatedly launched against Western educational traditions by such thinkers as diverse as Elie Wiesel, George Steiner, and Malcolm X. These attacks often had the effect of making ethics seem like nothing more than a cynical tool employed by imperialistic bureaucrats or thuggish thieves of the resources that rightly belonged to third world countries. These attacks also paved the way for post-colonial studies that have become a standard mode of criticism in literary criticism and anthropology.

¹¹ Throughout the 20th century Sigmund Freud's views became so widely accepted that they crept into everyday discourse (›the Oedipus complex‹ and ›the Freudian slip, for example), and these views painted a picture of human accountability that seemed to remove ethics from the equation because, according to Freud, human motives are mostly unseen and incapable of willful inspection, meaning that whatever actions those motives lead us to commit are in some sense never our fault because we literally don't know why we are doing what we do.

¹² Jacques Derrida's theory (generally known as ›deconstruction‹), profoundly dominant among academic critics for the last thirty years of the 20th century, argued that texts never make ethical claims because they do not even refer to the world but only refer to other acts of language, and that, in any event, all textual meaning is indefinitely postponed, a view that seemed to most people to make ethical deliberation if not entirely senseless, at least hopelessly feeble.

¹³ Michel Foucault's claim that writers are partly to blame for the Western world's oppression of the weak, the poor, and the different threw confusion into ethical discussion because of his view that writers, the people from whom, traditionally, we thought we could expect to be given models of

Under the force and weight of all of these influences, ethical criticism bent and broke, and remained stuck for most of the 20th century in a literary criticism version of John Bunyan's Slough of Despond. A few critics made sidebar attempts to do something now and then that might have been called ethical criticism – some of the work of F. R. Leavis, Irving Babbitt, Ivor Winters, Lionel Trilling, and Kenneth Burke comes to mind – but either this work proved completely ineffectual at re-focusing the attention of academic and intellectual critics (Leavis, Babbitt, and Winters) or the critics who took such lines of argument became well-known for *other* lines of argument, not their ethical criticism (Trilling and Burke).¹⁷

It is curious, however – and, more than curious, it tells a compelling story about the inescapability of ethical concerns – to note that no matter how forcibly 20th-century critics tried to manage the house of criticism such that ethical criticism was kept locked in some Closet of Disrepute, the human concerns from which ethical criticism springs kept pushing it back into the middle of the room. During the nearly forty years of postmodern hegemony in criticism, it was considered almost an intellectual felony punishable by ridicule-unto-professional-death to introduce

productive ethical deliberation as well as the elucidation of deep ethical insights, are manipulated by culture (the episteme) to help keep the rest of us in line with the desires of our economic and political masters. Foucault gave criticism the metaphor of writers as mere pencils in the hands of society's power agents who were the real authors of the master narratives of social and political oppression.

¹⁴ For most of the 20th century the discipline of anthropology spread widely the notion that different cultures are so distinct in their traditions and value systems that all ethical codes must be understood as cultural artifacts that apply only within limited cultural contexts.

¹⁵ The anthropological perspective referred to in the previous note dovetailed with Marxism and produced a view that by the 1990s had become nearly *de rigueur* in the humanities and social sciences, the view that human beings are not human beings at all, at least not in the old-fashioned sense of being agents who possess autonomy of will and independence of cognition, but, are, instead, formed ›subjects‹ – ›social constructs‹ – made of cultural influences (language, race, class, gender, ethnicity, and so on) that go ›all the way down‹.

¹⁶ The postmodernist claims that truth is never Truth and is always a product of perspectives, not knowledge; that truth is always a product of interests, not facts; and that truth is always a product of historical contingencies and particularized forms of embodiment (race, class, gender), never universal human needs or interests, are claims that seemed to make ethics not only irrelevant to an analysis of human problems and human products such as literary works, but seemed to make ethics an integral part of the problems we endure, not an integral path to the solutions that we need.

¹⁷ The disesteem in which ethical criticism was generally held during the entire 20th century is well illustrated by the reception at mid-century (1961) of the final chapter of Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Even an author who achieved Booth's elevated influence for his contributions to technical analysis found himself attacked again and again for what he had to say in the final chapter of his book, ›The Morality of Impersonal Narration‹, where he had the temerity to suggest that ›impersonal narration has raised moral difficulties too often for us to dismiss moral questions as irrelevant to technique.‹ (ibid., 378) The resistance to this chapter almost always boiled down to the claim, summarizing broadly, that art is one thing, morality another thing, and never the twain should meet. The attitude on the part of Booth's many critics of this chapter is that the twain should especially not be made to meet by a highly esteemed member of the literary establishment holding an appointment at a prestigious institution such as the University of Chicago.

ethics in literary theory, yet *politics* played a vastly important role in theory during this entire period. The fact that political theory and the agendas of political policy are *always* nested inside ethical assumptions was an inconvenient fact that simply never got mentioned. As I put it in a previous publication,

Both within the academy and within society as a whole, someone is always claiming that a given novel, movie, or TV program is either uplifting or degrading, inspiring or demeaning, should be read and seen by everyone or shouldn't disgrace either video airwaves or the shelves of the public library. Every time a feminist exposes Hemingway's complicity with the patriarchy, or every time an African-American critic recommends the retrieval of slave narratives because such narratives shame our past and help us shape the future, and every time a Judith Fetterley, a Terry Eagleton, or a Michel Foucault decries the dehumanizing effects of master narratives on subject-readers, such critics are deeply engaged in important versions of ethical criticism that are not at all diminished in robustness for being disguised as any kind of discourse but ethical criticism. (Gregory 1998, 195)

Allow me to offer one typical example of an important and well-known work of 20th-century criticism that, right in the middle of a critical discourse that ostensibly opposes ethical criticism, nevertheless deploys ethical commentary as an apparently unavoidable dimension of literary analysis. If this sounds self-contradictory, it is. I offer this one example here – and refer to other examples in a footnote – all of which stand in for a much larger range of examples that could be offered.¹⁸

¹⁸ A few other brief examples selected almost at random will further corroborate my point. When Victor Sklovsky argues, for example, that ›habitualization‹ – his term for living a life of unself-conscious habit – drains the vitality and vividness from life (›so life is reckoned as nothing« 2007, 778), and that ›art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*« (ibid.), he is clearly making the ethical claim that art is *good for us* in its ability to bring us *more* life, and to bring it more abundantly, than life without art. John Crowe Ransom echoes this notion with great fidelity in his claim that ›the poetic impulse [...] means to reconstitute the world of perceptions« (1971, 877). In a second example, the confusing strangeness of Foucault's question, ›How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fictions threatens our world?« (2007, 913) is resolved by the realization that while he seems to be making a technical point, he is really making a point that is fundamentally ethical. The ›danger‹ he sees in fiction is the ethical danger of readers deriving their notions of what ideas are acceptable in society from established and acclaimed authors, whose established status means, to Foucault, that they always speak for the establishment, and thus exert an influence that tends to shut down the free flow in society of alternative, different ideas: ›the author [...] is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture [...] one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, and recomposition of fiction.« (ibid.) In other words, authors play a negative ethical role in our culture by limiting the ideas we draw on to establishment ideas; Foucault is convinced that the recirculation of such ideas in a society – ah, here comes the ethical payoff point – contributes to the oppression of those with radical, alternative notions of justice and fairness. To take a third example, Robert Penn Warren claims that ›a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge puts it, make the reader into ›an active creative being« (1971, 991), which is tantamount to the ethical claim that being passive readers is not just an aesthetic violation, but a mode of existence that denies and evades the complexities and resistances of life in favor of taking ›the easy statement as solution«. ›Such a mind«, says Warren, ›will seem merely an index to lukewarmness, indecision, disunity, treason.« (ibid., 992) *Treason?* Treason to what? Typical of New Critics' ethical references, Warren is vague

In one of the iconic, foundational texts of New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks's ›Irony as a Principle of Structure‹ (1949), Brooks performs a typical, New Criticism ›close reading‹ of a poem, Randall Jarrell's ›Eighth Air Force. After repeating intellectual gestures that we all recognize as the standard stuff of New Criticism (›There are no superfluous parts, no dead or empty details«, ›The Pontius Pilate metaphor, as the poet uses it, becomes a device for tremendous concentration.« *ibid.*, 1047), Brooks insists explicitly that the poem has nothing to do with ethics because it exists solely on an aesthetic plane – ›We do not ask a poet to bring his poem into line with our personal beliefs – still less to flatter our personal beliefs‹ (1048) – yet at the end of his essay he introduces considerations that are unequivocally ethical, almost, one is tempted to say, against his will, if not against his better judgment.

Jarrell manages to bring us by an act of imagination, to the most penetrating insight. Participating in that insight, *we doubtless become better citizens. (One of the ›uses‹ of poetry, I should agree, is to make us better citizens.)* [...] Finding its proper symbol, defined and refined by the participating metaphors, *the theme becomes a part of the reality in which we live* – an insight, rooted in and growing out of concrete experience, many-sided, three-dimensional.
(*ibid.*, emphasis added)

It is impossible to read this conclusion to Brooks's essay without being confused, or without thinking that Brooks himself is confused. Clearly, Brooks says, poetry has nothing to do with ethics, but, just as clearly, Brooks says, poetry has ways of engaging readers that ›make us better citizens‹. Evasively, Brooks does not say what he *means* by ›better citizen‹, but this notion makes sense only if it is based on (covert) ethical assumptions.

Regardless of whether one is reading Brooks's fellow New Critics such as Empson, Warren, and Ransom; or whether one is reading Sklovsky, Bakhtin, Todorov, Frye, Foucault, Fish, Derrida, or other prominent critics of the period, Brooks's confusion and inconsistency is typical of many literary critics of the 20th century. Ethical considerations get dragged in sideways, often at the end of an essay or book, and usually uttered in a parenthetical, passing, or oh-by-the-way tone. The point needing emphasis here, however, is that no matter how evasive or confused they are, *ethical considerations almost always do get dragged in one way or another*. Surely it is neither whimsical nor intellectually willful to insist that something both intellectually and culturally significant is occurring when one 20th-century critic after another who explicitly disesteems ethical considerations at one level cannot seem to help referring to such considerations at another level. (See footnote 18 for further examples.)

In this first decade of the 21st century, intellectual room for a renewed ethical criticism is expanding as the credibility of postmodernism is shrinking. To under-

and indeterminate about what he means by this ethical accusation of *treason*, but the fact that it even occurs to him as an appropriate word to use suggests the underlying ethical thrust of his comment.

stand the see-saw relations of this dynamic, it will be helpful to discuss briefly three main reasons (both intellectual and cultural) that show why the credibility of post-modernism has shrunk so drastically. What is important about these reasons is how they help explain a new robustness in ethical criticism. The first two of these reasons occurred almost simultaneously near the end of the 20th century; the third reason occurred fourteen years later in the second year of the 21st century.

First, ethics came roaring back into criticism like an old-fashioned locomotive under a full head of steam at the end of 1987 with the explosive revelation of Paul de Man's collaborationist writings for the Nazis in occupied Belgium during World War Two. The postmodernists' claim that ethics has no place in literary criticism, a claim that de Man's own writings had not only strongly supported but, indeed, had made the most radical claims for, were suddenly trumped by the profound ethical shock that ran through the academy as de Man's duplicity came out in a series of articles first advanced by *The New York Times* in December, 1987 (cf. Anon. 1987). During all the years that de Man had been granted the status of unimpeachable integrity by his American and European peers – with a fervency that was at times weirdly reverential – de Man had never made one single reference to these collaborationist writings, sitting on them in absolute silence, and, indeed, telling lies that misdirected anyone's potential interest in them.¹⁹ (»de Man, when he ad-

¹⁹ I have often wished that de Man had been moved by some sudden and overwhelming spirit of confession to make a full revelation to me the night that he and I, along with a group of other people (sometime in the early 1980s) were attending a reunion at Northwestern University of scholars connected with The School of Criticism and Theory. We were sitting on the floor around a huge coffee table at Larry Lipking's house in Evanston, IL, chewing our way through an immense pile of greasy, saucy spare ribs placed on a platter in the center of the table. We were doing so with extreme clumsiness. »Spastic« might better describe our efforts: we were English professors, after all, not Nascar race fans, and we lacked certain skills. Like characters from some Dickens novel, all of us were industriously smearing grease and barbeque sauce everywhere on our clothes, the rug, and the unfortunate Lipking's coffee table. In one of the more comical moments of my career, de Man, on my left, was determined to carry on a conversation with me, on his right, whom he did not know from Adam, about the comparative merits of graduate students at Yale and the U. of Chicago, where he had enjoyed a recent guest appointment. He was doing so because he was determined to avoid the appeals of engagement being directed at him from *his* left by Murray Krieger, who wanted to stir the great man to say something great, an opportunity that the great man, who grew more detached as Krieger grew more animated, was quite determined to avoid. (As a U of C Ph.D. alumni, I am pleased to repeat that de Man reported his U of C students »more intellectually aggressive« than his Yale students.) Krieger was pushing harder and harder by getting more and more urgent, and while this little mini-drama of push-and-pull was unfolding, I was exchanging amused glances off and on with Wayne Booth on my right and with Gerald Graff, who was sitting behind me on the sofa. Of course, the movement that was necessary for making eye contact with Booth and Graff only spread my barbeque sauce around more grubbily, but I wanted to make sure that I was not the only person taking in the show. Krieger finally had to give up, and de Man and I continued our conversation about graduate students as if the entire convention had been organized for no other purpose. De Man did not, alas, decide that this was the moment or that I was the person to whom to confide about his

verted to his war years at all, told people that he'd gone to England and worked as a translator, or that he'd studied in Paris, or that he'd joined the underground in France – three palpable falsehoods.« Lehman 1991, 160) The effect on the field of criticism was like an earthquake, and

the academic equivalent of a guerilla war broke out in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *New Republic* and the *New Criterion*, the *Village Voice* and the *London Review of Books*. [...] *One felt that one might just possibly be witnessing a crucial turning point in the history of an idea.*

(Lehman 161, emphasis added)

As tempting as it is to rehearse this entire story, the point of the story for my argument in this essay is that the fall of Paul de Man *was* a crucial turning point in the history of an idea, or, more accurately, a whole set of ideas that lay at the center of post-structuralism in particular and postmodernism in general. Paul de Man's fall created compelling grounds for the reintroduction into literary discourse of the very kinds of ethical considerations that, in a deeply ironic turnabout, de Man's own theories had been designed to forestall.

Second, and nearly simultaneously with de Man's downfall, a remarkable cluster of new publications beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the present have provided a new set of arguments for not just the relevance of but the importance of ethical criticism. Some of these publications are, predictably, works in literary criticism, but others are works in philosophy, while some are works in science. Taken all together, with special credit for an unprecedented high level of argument going to Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, these publications create a strong case *against* postmodernist assumptions that human beings are entirely creatures of ›social construction‹, and an equally strong case *for* the intrinsic importance of ethics to human beings. All of these works have done much to rehabilitate the dignity and value of thinking about ethics in relation to literature in particular, to narratives in general, and to the arts of all kinds, especially the representational arts. One of the earliest defectors from deconstruction was Frank Lentricchia, in whose *Criticism and Social Change* (1983) he paved the way for the reintroduction of ethical analysis into literary criticism with his assertion that ›politically, deconstruction translates into the passive kind of conservatism called quietism; it thereby plays into the hands of established power. Deconstruction is conservatism by default – in Paul de Man it teaches the many ways to say that there is nothing to be done.« (ibid., 51) The primary sources from which intellectual capital was invested in a ›new‹ ethical criticism of literature came, however, from Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. In 1986 Nussbaum published *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, followed in 1988 by Wayne Booth's magisterial *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, followed two years later (1990) by another important

collaborationist writings in Belgium in the 1940s, and I thus missed my chance to bring to light the biggest journalistic scoop in the history of literary criticism.

Nussbaum book, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Two years later, in 1992, Frederick Crews published *The Critics Bear It Away*, which received much attention as a scorching attack on postmodernist inconsistencies and weaknesses. At the same time these intense books focused on literature were appearing, philosophers such as Mark Johnson and Richard Eldridge were publishing works arguing that notions hitherto thought by many people to be exclusive to literary criticism, such as metaphor and other figures of speech, have instead a biological basis, and that, instead of human beings being creatures of social construction »all the way down«, human beings have a nature in which, not very far down at all, lies a vast network of inclinations, dispositions, neural programming, and perceptual protocols that come installed in every human being's brain as a part of our evolutionary heritage. In 1987 Mark Johnson published *The Body In the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, while two years later Richard Eldridge published *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding*. In 1991 Mary Midgley published *Can't We Make Moral Judgments?*, and in 1992 Robert Louden published *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*, both of which argue that ethics comes neither from transcendental sources nor entirely from culture, but from intrinsic human needs that get mediated and tweaked by culture but that are not created by culture. The next year, in 1993, two books appeared that argue strongly against the post-modern view of an infinitely malleable human nature entirely shaped by cultural forms of pressure and embodiment: James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense* and Mark Johnson's *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. In 1996 Steven Mithen published his ground breaking *The Prehistory of the Mind*, giving readers a sense of the vastness of time in which evolutionary pressures shaped the human brain, and, thus, also shaped many features of human cognition, emotion, perception, and interpersonal protocols, such as ethics. Also in 1996, Frans de Waal, a research scientist at the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center at Emory University, published *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*, arguing that some features of ethics are shared with other species of animals and that, while ethics is centrally important to human beings, it is not *unique* to human beings, a view that reinforces the notion that ethics is an intrinsic human orientation, not a product of culture entirely, and certainly not just a product of any particular set of cultural biases. Two years later, in 1998, E. O. Wilson published *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, in which he asserts that »the arts are not solely shaped by errant genius out of historical circumstances and idiosyncratic personal experience. The roots of their inspiration date back in deep history to the genetic origins of the human brain, and are permanent.« (ibid., 218). Lewis Wolpert's 1996 book, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief*, takes a line of argument similar to Wilson's. In 1999 Geoffrey Galt Harpham published a searching inquiry into ethics, ethical criticism, and postmodernism, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society*, a work that has received too little

attention. In 2005 Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson published an anthology of essays on the new approaches in criticism drawn from research done in the fields of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (with forewords by E. O. Wilson and Frederick Crews), but perhaps the two most well-known and influential books arguing for the value of applying the evolutionary perspective to the arts and ethics are Stephen Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994) and *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002). My own book on ethical criticism, *Shaped By Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives*, appeared in 2009.

I have not seen anywhere else the third point to which I now turn, but for nearly a decade it has seemed clear to me that an additional major blow to the cachet and swagger that postmodernism enjoyed for almost forty years was the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001. After 9/11, the typical postmodern ethos of mooning the establishment and indulging in a rhetoric of sophomoric naughtiness, subversion, and transgression ran distastefully counter to the emotional mood of the national moment (a ›moment‹ that is still ongoing, at least in America). To a nation in the throes of shock and grief, a discourse of subversion and paradox seemed profoundly deficient in gravitas. It was not a discourse that offered comfort or made sense out of tragedy, loss, grief, bewilderment, and fear. To many people, 9/11 made postmodernism seem cheap, cynical, and shallow. There was in fact a mood of national urgency about the need for a frankly ethical discourse, an urgency that helps explain why George W. Bush's simplistic attempt to meet that need by giving the nation an ethical discourse revolving around his accusation about an ›axis of evil‹ collection of terrorist states (State of the Union speech, January 29, 2002) was met with general acceptance instead of being widely ridiculed for the feeble notion that it was. The nation's social and political context then (and now) was not a context in which postmodernism could continue to thrive.

2. Ethical Criticism's Second Chance – What's At Stake?

So – ethical criticism is back, after a fashion if not exactly *in* fashion. At least it seems no longer despised. Does this matter? And if ethical criticism is going to get a second chance to make a lasting and valuable contribution to critical discourse in the academic and intellectual spheres, how is it going to avoid making the same mistakes that plagued it in the past: fatuity, doctrinaire shrillness, empty moralizing for the sake of moralizing, and fruitless debates with critical ›enemies‹ over the imputed ethical purity or ethical rot of one preferred or reviled work over another?

What's at stake in ethical criticism anyway? Ethical critics, regardless of the very long time they had to work out a decent theory, have in fact never clearly done so. Typical of the history of ethical criticism are infuriatingly evasive claims such as

Matthew Arnold's statement near the end of ›Preface to *Poems*, 1853‹ that, »I know not how it is, but their commerce with the ancients appears to me to produce, in those who constantly practice it, a steadying and composing effect upon their judgment, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general.« (1968, 493) This claim is supported by no arguments or evidence and is left hanging, intellectually, by that frustrating clause, »I know not how it is.« This is the way ethical criticism was typically done until the late 20th-century work of Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. As ethical critics now contemplate the possibility of reclaiming a hearing for their point of view, they *must* do better at developing real arguments rather than run on brainlessly and tediously about which works teach readers the ›right‹ lessons about ethics, ›right‹ usually referring to whatever ethical scheme the critic prefers.

What's at stake in ethical criticism is the centrality of both ethics and literary art to human beings' lives as morally deliberative, socially embedded, imaginatively fertile, and persistently emotional creatures who are capable, even if frequently unwilling and clumsy about doing so, of submitting their moral deliberations, their social relations, their imaginative constructions, and their emotional impulses to rational inspection, intellectual analysis, and ethical evaluation.

Ethics refers to all the ways that people perform the essentially important social and moral task of evaluating human beings' conduct as right or wrong, their own as well as others'. Literary art refers to those structures of language designed for the stimulation of aesthetic, imaginative, emotional, and ethical responses rather than for instrumental or utilitarian purposes. Artistic structures of language include the entire range of literary art: narratives, poems, chants, songs, movie scripts, TV scripts, and so on. The question for ethical criticism is whether there exists any space for enlightening and fruitful arguments about the dynamics between ethics and literary experience. There are more than 2000 years' worth of ›yes‹ answers to this question, but, frankly, these yes answers – despite the fact that they are often inspiring, erudite, and moving testimonials to critics' deep engagement with various texts – are seldom analytical in mode and seldom convincing as arguments. There have been about 130 years' worth of ›no‹ answers to this question, but, frankly, these answers are also unconvincing, not to mention inconsistent enough to give one intellectual whiplash.

Ethical criticism needs a new start. In the remainder of this essay I will be working toward a new ›yes‹ answer – yes, there is both space and need for fruitful and enlightening arguments about the dynamics between ethics and literary art – but this new ›yes‹ argument will entail rejection of most of what both traditional ethical critics *and* their detractors have had to say.

As an abstract concept or as an academic or intellectual topic of discussion, people with certain agendas may be able to *talk* themselves around ethics – this is what postmodern theorists who viewed ethics as a tool of oppression attempted to do – but they never manage to *live* their way around ethics, and most of the time (to their

ethical credit if not to their intellectual consistency) they do not even attempt to do so. For postmodernists as for all the rest of us, honesty counts – not just peripherally but centrally – in all arenas of real life (even if it does not count, curiously, in postmodern theory).²⁰ Ethics counts because ethics is an evolved adaptation that served the survival interests of the individuals among our ancient ancestors who figured out – behaviorally if not consciously – that a person's odds of survival were greater if everyone in the tribe observed certain injunctions about right and wrong, such as fairness in the distribution of resources, honesty in discussions about the adjudication of internal group conflicts, and compassion toward tribal members suffering from injury, illness, or loss.

In other words, ethics counts because the rights and wrongs of everyday life count, and they don't count just because we have not yet become sufficiently sophisticated in mind or manners to cease *letting* them count. They count not only because they have helped us survive, but because the rights and wrongs of everyday life have more to do with the quality of our lives than any other considerations. In everyday life at every level ethics is *the* central issue of human interactions because *nothing* is more important to us than whether other people treat us with honesty or deceit, kindness or cruelty, stinginess or generosity, compassion or callousness, contempt or charity, fairness or unfairness, respect or disrespect, and whether they acknowledge, apologize for, or offer restitution for any violations of these ethical standards they may have committed against us. Not only are these standards always crucial to our own quality of life, but they also carry an imperative of reciprocity. It *matters* to us not only how others treat us, but how we treat others.

The deep claim of ethics on human beings is illustrated clearly by the tenacity with which we hold on to some fundamental ethical standards despite the frequency with which they are violated. Cheating is common, for example, and so is deceit, but we never cease being shocked, angry, hurt, or outraged when our friends, family members, our bosses, or the politicians who represent us turn out to be cheaters and deceivers. The commonness of cheating and deceit never makes us blasé about being the object of these unethical behaviors. We cut off friends who lie to us and we vote politicians out of office or send them to jail for cheating. We may

²⁰ It has stunned me numerous times over the last thirty-five years to see the number of occasions on which my postmodernist colleagues exhibit complete lack of awareness that their deconstruction and post-structuralist theories absolutely pull the rug from underneath their quite ethical selves. The frequency and persistence of this intellectual inconsistency has been bewildering, and sometimes breathtaking, to witness, especially among people for whom the life of the mind is, at least imputedly, centrally important. My only hypothesis for explaining this intellectual disjunction is to suppose that loyalty to an ideology, and postmodernism has been nothing if not an ideology, always nourishes the tendency to make the ideologist ignore everything in other people's commentary, and even in the ideologist's own behavior, that does not square with the tenets of the ideology.

talk about ethics as an outmoded structure of moralistic injunctions, but the moment a spouse cheats or a child lies or a friend steals, it turns out that ethics *counts*.

The unavoidability of ethics explains why New Critics and postmodernists who *try* to ignore ethics in their discussions of literary art nevertheless keep trundling ethics back into their discussions like dieters who find themselves sneaking desserts at night right in the middle of their most determined efforts to lose weight. Human beings are built to like sweetness and they are also built to assess their interactions with each other by the application of ethical criteria. *Ethics is primal, not discretionary. Ethics lies at the center of and derives from the nature and requirements of sociability itself.* This does not mean that all human beings in all cultures share the same ethical standards for all human interactions, but what is less important than variations among ethical standards is the fact that there are no cultures in which ethical standards are not central to human interactions. As I put it in *Shaped By Stories*,

Every culture fills in the educational gaps left by first hand experience by means of stories. As Philip Sidney said so long ago (in 1583), ›poetry hath ever been the first light-giver to ignorance.‹ Stories' ethical visions enlighten our ignorance by giving us information that goes deeper than mere description. The real problem of life for human beings is not deciding on the one ›right‹ description of the world, because the truth is that we can live quite comfortably as the fervent believers of many (and sometimes vast) descriptive errors. You can live as complete and happy a life thinking that the world is flat as you can knowing that it's round, but if you cannot read other people's ethical dispositions – if you cannot tell whether other people are prone to help you or harm you, deceive you or tell you the truth, hate you or love you, be kind or unkind to you, be generous or stingy with you, and so on – then it won't matter if you think your world is flat or round because it will just be a mess. The real problem in life is knowing how to *judge* things, and this is a problem that, over and over, narratives' ethical visions help us think about in richer ways than if we had to rely solely on our own first hand experience.

(Gregory 2009, 36)

But everything I have just said about ethics is also true of literary experience. Human beings are built for art, including literary art, as deeply as they are built for ethics. Both are human universals. There are no cultures without ethics and art, and both are co-eval with the emergence of modern human beings. In *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton gives a vivid account of the immensely long period of evolutionary time during which human beings' behaviors and dispositions were shaped by adaptive pressures and the mechanisms of natural and sexual selection. It is only against the backdrop of this immense span of time that the shaping of the human brain into something that we might call a ›narrative brain‹ makes sense. According to Dutton,

the Pleistocene itself – the evolutionary theater in which we acquired the tastes, intellectual features, emotional dispositions, and personality traits that distinguish us from our hominid ancestors and make us what we are – was 80,000 generations long ... [and only] a slight pressure over [only a few] thousands of generations can deeply engrave physical and psychological traits into the mind of any species.

(2009, 42)

The Neanderthals disappeared in a mere 30 generations, in a mere 1000 years, which leads to the robust hypothesis that during the vast span of the Pleistocene's 1.6 million years, the socially cohesive functioning and imaginatively stimulating effects of story telling and poem making became indelible features of human consciousness through the slowly evolving brain functions of the survivors, our forebears, whose survival was in part the *consequence* of just those socially cohesive and imaginatively stimulating devices of counterfactual and ›as if‹ modes of thinking developed by literary art. Dutton relies on the work of two of the most well known researchers in the field of evolutionary psychology, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, to make the powerful point that

Where Kant claimed that a suspension of interest in the existence of an object was fundamental to a proper imaginative response to art, Tooby and Cosmides argue more broadly that our imaginative lives are fundamental to our humanity, integrated into our nature by evolution. In particular, narrative art is for them an intensified, functionally adaptive extension of mental qualities that largely set us apart from other animals. [...] Fiction-making is an evolved adaptation. [...] By allowing us to confront the world not just as naïve realists who respond directly to immediate threats or opportunities (the general condition of other animals) but as supposition-makers and thought-experimenters, imagination gave human beings one of their greatest evolved cognitive assets. For Tooby and Cosmides, ›It appears as if humans have evolved specialized cognitive machinery that allows us to enter and participate in imagined worlds.‹ (Dutton 2009, 105–106)

In the evolution of modern human beings, then, the human, the ethical, and the narrative unfolded and developed inside of and around each other as integral components of a holistic, organic form. Poetry and story telling are no less primal and nondiscretionary than ethics. Also, as with ethics, what is less important than variations of literary art in different cultures is the fact that there are no cultures in which both ethical standards *and* story telling do not play crucially important roles in human psychology and individual socialization.

The importance to ethical criticism of contemporary work being done in the fields of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology can hardly be overstated. For 2500 years ethical critics have been making claims about the formative, shaping power of narratives and literary art, but such critics have never been able to support these claims with anything even remotely resembling deep psychological argument and empirical evidence – until now. Today, however, with the emergence of fMRI scanners and the development of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology as distinct fields, deep arguments *and* empirical evidence about how literary art makes its impact are beginning to emerge. For the last fifteen years or so, one of the most exciting and significant terms in neural research and cognitive science is ›brain plasticity‹, a term that refers to contemporary notions of brain functioning and development that are radically different from older, traditional notions, especially the traditional notion that brain development is essentially completed, closed, and fixed by late adolescence. Brain plasticity refers to the brain's capacity to do two

things, first, to continue developing until about age twenty-five, with judgment and decision-making functions the last to develop, and, second – and most significant for ethical criticism – the brain is now known to change physical structure and functioning on the basis not merely of physical input, such as the input from a brain injury, but on the basis of imaginative and hypothetical input, such as that stimulated by poetry, narratives, and story telling. Ethical criticism is ready to begin supplementing anecdotal storytelling and descriptive accounts of literary art with accounts that begin to blend these traditional modes of criticism with new modes of research in psychology and biology.²¹

From Plato on, most philosophers, writers, and critics commenting on literary art, whether they are disposed to view literary art with favor or not, have founded their ruminations on the same deep intuition about its powerful educational potential. Turned into discourse, this intuition becomes the default assumption that defines an ethical critic: the assumption that literary representations have the power to influence people's character and conduct. The problem, however, as I showed in the case of Matthew Arnold, is that being an ethical critic by *default* does not make one an ethical critic by *argument*. The history of ethical criticism is marked by two kinds of ethical critics. First, there are ethical critics who, like Sidney and Shelley, wish to emphasize literary art's power to uplift the human spirit and improve readers' morality. Second, there are ethical critics who, like Plato and the Puritans and Richard Posner, wish to emphasize literary art's capacity for corrupting readers' moral character by making them believe a bunch of lies and by leading them into moral confusion. But instead of making analytical arguments that actually support their claims, both of these camps, whom we might call, respectively, the Ethical Critics of Uplift vs. the Ethical Critics of Skepticism, tend to operate like full-bore partisans rather than judicious critics. Like defense attorneys eager to show their client from every advantageous angle, Ethical Critics of Uplift obdurately deny that literary art could ever be morally suspect («Your honor, the book did not pull the trigger!«). Simultaneously, the Ethical Critics of Skepticism operate like prosecution attorneys who are determined to show every weakness and wart the defendant has ever had, and obdurately recount the many literary representations of chaos, cruelty, and mayhem, or the many examples of literary artists who were feckless or immoral, as if piled up citations of literary art's representations of these terrible things constitute obvious proof that literature's ethical influence is always suspect.

²¹ Authors who are developing the emerging field of literary criticism based on theories from evolutionary psychology and cognitive science include Noel Carroll, Joseph Carroll, Sharon Begley, Brian Boyd, Ellen Dissanayake, Morris Dickstein, Britt Peterson, Roberto Casati, Ronald de Sousa, Shaun Nichols, Gregory Currie, D. T. Max, Perrine Ruby and Jean Decety, Lydialyle Gibson, Susan Gilbert, and many others. Published material by the authors I have mentioned here can be found below in the References.

3. How to Reframe A ›New‹ Ethical Criticism, Clarifying What's At Stake and Introducing A New Methodology

At the heart of the ›old‹ ethical criticism lie three confusions that have plagued it from the beginning. The first confusion is *methodological*. Whether the criticism comes from an Ethical Critic of Uplift or an Ethical Critic of Skepticism, critics from both camps tend to rely on a two-pronged methodology of argument. The first prong entails relating anecdotes of personal experience – »this work moved me immensely and let me tell you what this felt like and how I was changed for the better (or worse) by it«, as if these personal accounts prove something about the inevitable or necessary effects of not just the works under discussion, but of literary works in general. The second prong entails the piling up of multiple examples that map onto the ethical critics' positive or negative views of literary art, as if the piling up of examples, like the relating of personal anecdotes, says something predictive or determinative about literature's ethical effects. Sidney and Shelly pile up examples from the classics that show heroism, nobility, and goodness, while Plato and Posner pile up examples from the classics that show brutality, meanness, and wrong doing.

The second confusion is an *intellectual* confusion about *how* literary content achieves ethical traction in the first place.²² This confusion generally expresses itself as claims about the ethical *lessons* that a work's contents are alleged to teach and that the reader, presumably, learns. No matter how many times ethical critics repeat these kinds of claims, however, the frequency of their reiteration does not disguise their bogus status. *No one* can ever foresee exactly what sense, meaning, or application of *any* literary content that *any* particular reader may draw from any work, see in any work, or impose on any work. It follows that if no one can ever make confident predictions about what anyone else will *make* of a work of literary art, then claims about that work's allegedly inevitable effects are rendered impotent.

The third confusion is a combined *ethical* and *rhetorical* confusion. Typically, the ›old‹ ethical criticism employs a rhetoric of definitive claims – »this work is terrible for you, that work is uplifting and wonderful for you, end of story« – designed to shut down all discourse that does not echo the critic's own position. This rhetorical rigidity is based on an even deeper ethical rigidity that assumes that the eth-

²² Whether we are examining ethical criticism as suspicious of literary art as Plato claiming that »all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators, who copy images of virtue and the other themes of their poetry, but have no contact with the truth« (1971, 36), or ethical criticism as confident of literary art's ethical uplift as Sidney claiming that poetry »move[s] men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and [...] make[s] them know that goodness whereunto they are moved«, (1971, 158), or ethical criticism in our own time as suspicious of ethical uplift as Richard Posner claiming that »the classics are full of moral atrocities [...] the world of literature is a moral anarchy«, (1997, 5) the similarity among all of these versions of ethical criticism is the assumption that literary art's ethical effects is a function of its content.

ical critic's role is to tell people, not to ask them or discuss with them, how they identify and evaluate the good and bad influences in their lives.

There are many reasons why a ›new‹ ethical criticism could be highly useful in contemporary criticism and discourse, not the least of which is ethical criticism's potential helpfulness in creating language, categories of thought, and deliberative models for processing the persistently important ethical questions that occupy so much of everyone's intellectual, emotional, psychological, and emotional energy. All of us are perpetually engaged with such ethical questions as »am I doing the right thing in this situation or that situation«, »am I being treated fairly or unfairly by other people«, »what are my obligations to this person, to my colleagues, to my family, to my neighbors, to my country, and so on«, »when does honesty compel me to say things that might be hurtful to others«, »am I justified in pretending that I don't see Person X's appeal to me for help«, »am I really obliged to forgive the person who hurt my feelings last week«, and on and on.

Beyond these ethical questions of daily conduct, all of us also persistently engage with even deeper issues about *ethos* as we struggle with such questions as »is my quick temper hurtful to people that I love«, »am I too susceptible to other people's manipulations«, »am I an honest person if I cheat on my taxes«, »am I too much of a grudge holder«, »why do I lash out when I'm angry«, »how much material and emotional support do I owe my grown children«, »am I as good a person as I want to be«, and so on. Most of us are forced to process these kinds of ethical conundrums by relying only on our intuitions and the Sunday-school bromides that were crammed into us in our youth, but we would undoubtedly find it easier to act as reasonable creatures if we could also rely on a vital tradition of ethical criticism that opens up ethical conundrums for productive discussion instead a rigid ethical criticism that shoves doctrinaire or religious ›solutions‹ down people's throats.

A helpful rather than a managerial kind of ethical criticism would be a ›new‹ ethical criticism, such as that initiated by Martha Nussbaum's and Wayne Booth's groundbreaking books at the end of the 20th century, but much work remains to be done. In the remaining space of this essay I want to suggest ways in which ethical critics can think in fresh terms about some of the hoary confusions that have plagued ethical criticism since Plato, and show how we can *rethink* such issues as the dynamic porosity of selfhood, the ethical content of literary art in relation to selfhood, the rhetoric of ethical argumentation, the methodology of ethical argument, and the reasons why any of these issues matter in the first place.

Analyzing the ethical content of literary art is a much more complex intellectual challenge than most ethical critics have ever understood. In some ways, the contents of literary art are static and fixed. Robert Browning's ›My Last Duchess‹, for example, always has the same words in the same order, even down to the same punctuation and capitalization. It does not have the autonomy to suddenly begin discoursing about the Duke's finances or the Duchess's childhood or the need for fence repair around the Duke's gardens. On the other hand, works of literary art have a kind of agency about

them that belies their fixed structure, and the special agency they have is their *power of invitation*, a notion that I would like to introduce as central to a ›new‹ ethical criticism, and as a replacement for the notion of *lessons*, a central concept in the ›old‹ ethical criticism. The notion of ethical *lessons* tends to assume that the text – or at least the text's ethical content – operates as a kind of signet ring that, through the brute pressure exerted by the author's intentionality, impresses itself into the soft wax of the reader's receptive self. Such a notion is based on an inadequate understanding of selfhood and a shallow view of the dynamic interface between a work's aesthetic tactics and the work's potential ethical influence on a reader.

If at the center of a ›new‹ ethical criticism we replace the notion of *lessons* with the notion of *invitations*, we open up a way of getting at, identifying, and analyzing the dynamic interface I just alluded to without having to rely on misleading notions of selfhood such as that suggested by the signet ring. A self is not a *thing* that hardens into whatever pattern got pushed into it earliest or hardest. We do indeed experience external pressures, but our relationship to those pressures is more of a complex, give-and-take relationship than it is a once-and-for-all pressure that gives us a shape we harden into.

The self that defines a person is a *process*, not a *thing*, and it is always in motion. It is always *becoming*; it never just *is*, and the *mechanism* of anyone's perpetually emerging selfhood is the pattern of the ›yeses‹ and ›noes‹ that the person extends to all of life's invitations. The fatal flaw in the postmodern notion of a self as a *product* of culture that goes ›all the way down‹ is that if this notion were true, it would not be a truth *available* to anyone, including the postmodern critic who intones it. In Stanley Fish's essay ›Rhetoric‹, for example, a kind of summative statement on his part of what rhetoric is, he devotes most of his essay to an explicit rejection of the authority of all ethical discourse. »Everything is rhetorical«, he says, by which he means that there are no points of view and no motives that are not »constructed« by cultural and political interests. In one of his most energetic restatements of this view, however, Fish slides into a quite old-fashioned ethical discourse without, apparently, either wanting to or intending to. The political benefits of rhetorical criticism, Fish states, are

that by repeatedly uncovering the historical and ideological basis of established structures (both political and cognitive), one becomes sensitized to the effects of ideology and *begins to clear a space in which those effects can be combated*; and as that sensitivity grows more acute, the area of combat will become larger until it encompasses the underlying structure of assumptions that confers a *spurious legitimacy* on the powers that currently be.
(1995, 217, emphasis added)

Fish apparently fails to see two implications of his rock bottom notion that *all* discourse is rhetorical *all the way down*. In the first place, this not a rhetorical claim; it is an ontological claim – it is a claim about being, not about rhetoric – and thus contradicts Fish's assertion that there *are* no ontological claims. In the second place, Fish's claim that the authority wielded by the current powers-that-be is »spurious« is a claim one could not make in a world in which »everything is rhetorical«. In that

world any »space« for combating »spurious« assumptions could only be another self-interested rhetorical claim, not a space that represents what Fish illogically thinks it represents: a space *beyond* rhetoric where the injustices and wrongs of ill-founded power can be exposed. In the end, Fish can only be supposing, silently, that justice is *not* merely a rhetorical gesture; otherwise, the criticism of established power in the interests of justice makes no sense. If you are a fish in a barrel, the only way for you to know that your environment is a barrel is for you to somehow acquire a point of view outside of the barrel, but if your barrel is all there is, then that outside point of view is impossible, and, in the end, postmodernism breaks its intellectual back on this illogical contradiction. If we really are formed by culture all the way down, the postmodern critic could never know it any more than the fish in a barrel could yearn for a stream.

The truth is that despite all the cultural pressures that postmodernists and Marxists love to catalog, it remains the case that yeses and noes *are* available to human beings as agents, no matter how powerful the molding forces that press on us might be. We are never as free in our agency as we perhaps think we are, but never are we totally devoid of agency, either. As we respond to the world's invitations in this way or that way, we make up a self out of these responses because such responses configure – or, more accurately, they consistently *reconfigure* – our intellects, our beliefs, our emotions, and our ethical judgments. The discourse of a »new« ethical criticism needs to refocus itself from two perspectives that ethical critics can actually make arguments and produce evidence about, the two perspectives of *ethical invitations* and *aesthetic tactics*.

Every work of literary art extends to its readers at least three invitations that call for responses at three different levels. First, the work extends *invitations to feeling*. Every work invites its readers to respond in specifically emotional ways to the represented content: dread, suspense, indignation, gratification, curiosity, and so on. Second, the work extends to the reader *invitations to belief*, invitations, that is, for reader to believe certain facts or notions that the effects of the work depend on. The reader's assent to these invitations may be more of an operational assent than a deep existential commitment – the pleasure to be gleaned from the work usually depends on the reader's compliance – but it is not an insignificant ethical gesture on the part of readers that they willingly try on beliefs that may lie outside the scope of their everyday beliefs. Third, the work extends to the reader *invitations to ethical judgment*. At a fundamental level, readers interacting with artistic representations have to make judgments about who the good guys and the bad guys are, whose successes are deserved and are therefore gratifying, whose actions, thoughts, and speech demand disapproval, whose inner selves hang uncertain in the moral balance, and so on.

In a »new« ethical criticism focused on a literary work's invitations to feeling, belief, and judgment, ethical critics have no need to fall back on the belligerent rhetoric of definitive, authoritative claims. This new perspective encourages the con-

struction of hypothetical arguments of the sort that say, »*if* a reader accepts the work's invitations – if he or she says ›yes‹ to the work's prodding to feel this emotion here, to believe this idea here, to approve of this character here – then *these* ethical valences of influence *may* follow.« Note the necessity of limiting claims about ethical influence to possibilities, not certainties. Hypothetical, conditional claims rely for their authority on argument and textual evidence, not on the self-imputed superiority of one ethical critic's preferred ethical agenda over another's.

4. Literary Art and Invitations of Ethical Import: An Exemplum

Let me illustrate how an ethical criticism focusing on the analysis of *invitations* and *aesthetic tactics* can work by analyzing a poem that on its surface offers no obvious traction for ethical commentary, Robert Herrick's brief 17th-century poem, ›Upon Julia's Clothes‹. Even a work as apparently devoid of ethical references as this one, it turns out, can yield a rich crop of intellectually challenging and aesthetically productive insights that not only reveal but that underwrite the poem's potential ethical effects.

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
That brave Vibration each way free;
O how that glittering taketh me!
(Herrick 1891, 77)

My students would be prone to ask, »so what's ethical about this poem?« Wrong question. The subtext of this question presumes that if there are any ethical, or, for that matter, unethical features to Herrick's poem, they will lie in some *lesson* that the reader, if she gets it, will have *absorbed* into or *impressed* onto her character. But according to the new terms in which I am attempting to reframe ethical criticism, the power of this poem to carry, or exert, an ethical influence on a reader or listener depends more on a set of invitations that ask the reader to actively *do* something rather than to be passively impressed by a lesson.

Part of the reason so many ethical critics have missed this point over the centuries is that they have been misled by an inadequate educational theory. When they picture people learning lessons, ethical or otherwise, as, for example, children learning their lessons in school, the prevailing notion is often one of student minds storing academic content in mental warehouses, but this is bad education theory. Every adult knows that most of the lessons he or she learned in school have now been long forgotten, and, if the truth were admitted freely by everyone, even many of the more recent lessons directly connected with our adult lives have also been for-

gotten. Right now I cannot remember the name of Henry James's sister or the publication date of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, but I know I learned these content tidbits once upon a time. As for fields more remote from my everyday practices, I would dread to see the results of my being forced to retake high school biology tests now that I once got high grades on. My guess is that you would too.

So what *are* the lessons that we remember? The truth is, not many, and when we do remember valuable things, we generally do not remember them in lesson form; we remember them in the form in which we *use* them because, in fact, the sort of memory we employed when we first learned things that we now do well cannot take much credit for our present skill. When we now do something well, we do not rely on the memory of our lessons. We go beyond our lessons and we transform the memory of *of* into the power to *do*. *At this point our knowledge has become embedded within our cognitive apparatus, within our perceptual system, within our intellectual framework, and within our scheme of values.* Some skills even get embedded within our muscles. But not much of our ability to do complex things comes from the memory of lessons. Thus the question, »so what's ethical about Herrick's poem« is a bad question because, if complex learning is best described as a kind of practice – the ability of active doing rather than passive remembering – then this gives us a clue to the way poems in general, including Herrick's, exert their various forms of influence, including ethical influence.

The most obvious invitation in Herrick's poem is an invitation for the reader to enter the feelings and thoughts of the speaker. More precisely, the reader is invited to *re-create* in his or her own mind and heart, via the resources of the vicarious imagination, the speaker's *ethos*, using the speaker's words as the cues and prompts for that re-creation. If the *ethos* of a self, yours and mine, say, gets shaped primarily as you and I give our ›yes‹ and ›no‹ to life's invitations for response, the same kind of analysis – and the same kinds of inferences – will be relevant to what happens when we attentively engage Herrick's speaker's words. But not just his words: also his attitudes, his point of view, his sensibility, his values, and in fact his entire character. As we say ›yes‹ or ›no‹ to the poem's invitations, we are engaging in the same principle of *ethos* construction – and thus participating in an interaction with ethical consequences – that we are engaging in whenever we say ›yes‹ or ›no‹ to any number of life's other invitations that ask us to use the power of our vicarious imagination to identify empathetically with the feelings and character of our friends, family members, and admired heroes. The same process occurs in our interactions with characters who ask us for the kind of empathetic identification based on our attentive engagement with the poems, novels, operas, movies, or TV programs in which they ›live‹.

When we claim a genuine understanding of another person's feelings, thoughts, and character we mean we have gone out of ourselves, deployed our capacity for vicarious imagining, and have entered into a field of reference that was not our own. Assuming another person's field of reference, however, is an *ethical* activity

because entering this alternative field of reference actually reconfigures our own. The field of reference that *wasn't* our own henceforth *will* be our own, insofar as it will now exist among our own repertoire of possibilities for how to feel and think and judge. The self that we were prior to entering another person's field of reference is not there for us to return to once our act of understanding is achieved, and *that* is an ethical change. Even saying ›no‹ constitutes a sharpening of our *ethos*; it is a declaration of who we are. No matter how slightly, we will have become someone different from who we were before because we will have enlarged our capacity for thinking some thoughts we would not have thought in just this way, for feeling some emotions we would not have experienced in just this way, and for making some judgments that we would not have constructed in just the way that reading Herrick's poem invites us to do.

Understanding how Herrick's poem's invitations *work* entails analyzing the poem's aesthetic tactics. At a first level of aesthetic analysis, the poem invites us to recognize that the speaker's feelings are multiple and complex, not single and simple; nuanced and subtle, not straightforwardly declamatory; passionate, intense, and tightly focused, not random, speculative, or lukewarm; introspective and quiet, almost as much addressed to the speaker's own mind as to a reading audience; and structured, even in an artistic work so small, such that the emotions progress from sensory and sensual observations at the beginning to a tightly and quietly controlled explosion, or surge, of summative emotion at the end primarily produced by ›taketh‹, a word that viscerally evokes those moments in life when an unexpected realization, idea, or memory suddenly stops our breath, or, in this case, a passion that suddenly buckles the knees – and implies that the speaker is helplessly seized by emotions of longing and love more powerful than himself.

Given Herrick's theme – a man in love looking at a woman who excites him – and the deliberately brief scope of his expression – thirty seven words – this poem could very easily have wound up as an 17th-century forerunner of a Hallmark card: sentimental and sappy, full of false pathos. What could be more common than a poem about longing and love, the theme of every pop song from medieval ballads up to this morning's Top 40? But Herrick challenges himself to make a new exploration of this potentially trite theme arresting, primarily by contrasting *trite* feelings of longing and love (unspoken, lying in the background) with *fresh* and *vivid* feelings of longing and love, and he does so by using language that complicates those feelings and makes them subtle, nuanced, and complex.

The *trite* version of male longing is the stereotype of a man wanting sex, but Herrick's version of longing and love confounds this stereotypical expectation. By distancing the speaker from Julia physically, the poet keeps sexual longing in the background. In the foreground, the speaker's longing is a nuanced yearning not for nakedness, sweat, or touch, but for the more removed, non-tactile sensations of visual and auditory experience. 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. Herrick's lover reveals a sensibility that is ›taken‹ merely by the sight of Julia's *clothed* body; the *sound* of her movement, and the way the sight of her shimmering gown suggests to him the appearance of silver melting into liquid. Moreover, that shimmering silk seems to move of its own accord (›that brave vibration each way free‹), a locution in which ›free‹ suggests perhaps the independent agency of the woman wearing these silks, as well as the speaker's appreciation of that independence. The speaker is sufficiently self-controlled, relying more on art and thought than on impulse, not to demand any return declaration of love from Julia, or, indeed, not to demand any response from her at all. He is, at least at the moment, content to enjoy his beloved in an act of intensely introspective observation and contemplation that does not entail direct discourse.

The poet also distances his speaker from Julia psychologically, an effect that is created and then enhanced by his putting particular words into the speaker's mouth that are chiseled in their precision, showy in their artsiness, and immensely evocative in their emotional expressiveness. There are three examples of such careful diction in a poem of only thirty-seven words. First, ›whenas‹ and ›methinks‹ are words drawn from medieval English and were thus archaic even in Herrick's day. These words create an ethos for the speaker of a man at least as interested in art and language as in physicality. Second, the projection of this ethos is further enhanced by the explosively unexpected brilliance of ›liquefaction‹, a word that refers to a process in motion – something that is *becoming* liquid – not to something that is already liquid. No one in Herrick's time, or ours, could use this flagrantly beautiful onomatopoeic word unselfconsciously; it was a word as uncommon in Herrick's day as in ours. By using such recondite, artsy, but precise language, the poet rivets our attention on the nature and quality of the speaker's special powers of expression and attentiveness. Third, the subtle evocations of ›brave vibration‹, a phrase that draws on the semantic association between ›brave‹ and ›bravado‹, suggests that Julia may be fully aware of the magnetic attractiveness that her flouting, shimmering silks exert on men in general and on the speaker in particular. But regardless of what Julia may or may not know, and regardless of what her own intentions may be, a lover such as the poem's speaker who shapes the expression of his passion around archaic and unusual words used clearly for artistic rather than for instrumental purposes is a lover much less interested in a slam-bam sexual score than in the complex apprehension of a woman whose sweetness and femininity it pleases him to represent to himself by images of soft rustlings and liquidity rather than by clichéd images of bare flesh and heavy breathing.

5. »So You've Made Me Look At the Poem's Aesthetic Tactics – Are You Seriously Arguing That These Tactics Generate Ethical Influence?«

Am I really saying, as my students might ask, that anyone who reads this poem attentively will have I become a better person because of it? This question is too crude and blunt to be of much help. Starting with this question would be like using a hammer to open a package with crystal goblets in it: you will smash the crystal out of all recognition before you even know what you are looking for. Better question: has an attentive engagement with this poem invited me to become in any way a *different* person than I was before, and, if it has, how do I identify the spots in the poem where I have said ›yes‹ or ›no‹ to its invitations, how do I identify what those differences are, and how do I evaluate their potential effect on my character?

I have certainly said ›yes‹ to the poem's invitations to hold certain operational beliefs and to make certain operational judgments. The poem asks me to believe, for example, that the speaker is sincere, that his longing and love for Julia are authentic, and that nothing he says can be understood as cynical, ironic, or dismissive. Above all, perhaps, I am asked to believe that the speaker is *paying attention*, that his longing and love for Julia are not idle fancies, not mere distractions, not random impulses, but exist, instead, at the center of his feelings. As for ethical judgments, the poem invites me to approve of the speaker's character, to approve of his intensity, complexity, and subtlety of feeling, and, above all, to approve of his ability to build a context for his longing and love out of a wide range of feelings about and responses to Julia that are nuanced, neither dominated by nor limited to physical impulses, physical satisfactions, or male mastery. The ethos of the speaker is that of a man balanced in his capacities: he has passion but leavens passion with thought; he has impulses but mediates and thus controls them through language; he looks at surfaces but sees deeper than surfaces; he yearns but he has his yearning under such control that he is liberated to enjoy the more complex forms of apprehension that self-control makes available to him.

The ethical significance of saying ›yes‹ to these invitations was pointed to long ago by Aristotle, who observed that imitation – not in some superficial sense but in the deep sense of reconstructing *as our own* the feelings and conduct and ideas we see in other people – is *the* primal strategy we all deploy in order to educate ourselves about what it means to be human. For Aristotle, imitation is not slavish copying. Trying on one feature or another from the large range of people we imitate takes us, ultimately, beyond imitation and makes autonomy possible, but it all begins with imitation, with the reconstruction inside ourselves of what others feel, think, and do. An ›ethical‹ influence looked at from this perspective, then, we may define as *any influence that exerts shaping pressure on one's ethos, on who we become as a result of bending with or internalizing that influence.*

All of us register the impact of models from literary art by persistently using literary characters as points of reference in everyday life. »That person is such a Scrooge«, we say, or »a Scarlet O’Hara... a Shylock... a Wife of Bath... a Rochester... an Emma Bovary... a Jo March... a Judas... a Prince Hal... a Huck Finn... a Lizzy Bennet... a Willy Loman... a Jane Eyre... a Nora Helmer... a Bugs Bunny... an Ophelia« and on and on.

All of us try on characters from stories we have encountered – ›try on‹ in the deep sense of ›internally reconstruct‹ – but because this activity is such a default mode of human psychology, we often dismiss the ethical significance of doing so on the argumentatively sloppy, observationally superficial grounds that ›mere entertainment‹ is too lightweight to have any significance. This is a brainless claim that ignores how human minds work. It ignores the fact, for example, that children are most deeply shaped by imitation *while being entertained*, and it also ignores the fact that even for adults, the moments when human minds are being entertained are the very moments when their minds think least critically about the nature of the engagement, and are thus most open to influence *from* that engagement.

Although the history of autobiography is full of accounts from readers who claim that this or that book or seeing this or that movie ›changed my life‹, it still remains the case that not every reader’s *ethos* shifts vastly from the influence of a single engagement with a single work of literary art, and this obvious fact may induce some people to underestimate the potential for change that we submit ourselves to when we say ›yes, yes, yes‹ to the repeated invitations for empathetic identifications throughout an entire lifetime of empathetically ingesting hundreds of thousands of works of literary art that range from Homer and Shakespeare to Excedrin commercials. We should not forget to take into account the *cumulative* effects thus lodged within us. Even if each change we make is slight, *our lives and character are made up of these small changes*.

During the 20th century, the popularity of Freudian psychology imposed on Western culture the notion that the really important events in our lives are the painful ones, the traumas, but this view is almost entirely wrong. We are not so much shaped by our traumas as *misshaped* by our traumas. The focus on the importance of traumas misleads us to ignore the cumulative effects those ongoing occasions in life that we might call ›small‹ at the time but to which we respond with a steady flow of ›yeses‹ and ›noes‹ that, like cell division, constitute the building blocks of a self. These ›yeses‹ and ›noes‹ include, of course, our responses to literary art, and it is worth pondering the fact that we all know a vastly huger array of potential models from literary art than we know in real life. We accept invitations from literary art to empathetically assume different identities partly because it feels invigorating and liberating to enrich and enlarge our own lives in this way, partly because doing so helps us understand how other people feel and think, and partly because we all need to experiment with the possibility of adding new parts or qualities to ourselves from sources outside of us in the larger world.

Finally, then, returning to Herrick's poem, I can say that insofar as I have paid deep attention and have been able to replicate the pattern of feelings, thoughts, and judgment that his poem invites me to replicate, I have been led into an active practice of thought and feeling that will allow me to add the sensitivity and sensibility of Herrick's speaker to my repertoire of feelings and thoughts about longing and love. However minute – and, who knows, for some people the effect might not be minute at all – this is an ethical effect, and while I cannot predict with certainty that this effect will improve my moral character, it is also true that no one else can predict with certainty that it won't. The point is that whether I am better or not, I am *different*, and the fact that I am a different someone after a full engagement with this poem at least allows me the opportunity to deploy in my world an enhanced understanding derived from this full engagement. Every change in one's *ethos* is an ethical effect.

The ethical critic who can show how this or that work of literary art *may* exert an ethical influence on its readers does a real service to those of us who want to know not only why works of literary art are interesting, but why they might be important. What's at stake for human beings in ethical criticism is a better, clearer understanding of the ethotic influences that help us eventually become the persons that we turn out to be. Along the way, ethical critics focusing on literary art's invitations to feeling, belief, and judgment – and the aesthetic tactics that extend those invitations – can find ways of engaging in productive discourse with other critics rather than wasting their energies in fruitless arguments about works of literary art to which they arbitrarily impute automatically uplifting or inevitably pernicious effects.

In a world riven by the polarities that often seem to be tearing society apart; in a world where we are persistently confronted with a vast number of competing and contradictory claims about ethical notions; in a world in which reasonable and productive talk becomes more and more difficult as public discourse becomes more and more partisan and more and more bitter; in a world in which those without power seem to claim less and less attention from those who do have power; and in a world where most people would actually respond gratefully and positively if they just knew what to do to make things better, the contributions of a robust, reasonable, open-ended ethical criticism could be immensely useful. All of us know that the world is worse than it needs to be. All of us know that the world could be better. I, for one, think that ethical criticism has a role to play in helping this ›better‹ world emerge, not by telling people what they should believe, but by helping them learn how to make arguments rather than encouraging them merely to crush their opponents. I also believe that a ›new‹ ethical criticism that helps all of us analyze productively the relationship between the development of selves and the invitations of literary art is a promising mechanism for making that con-

tribution in a way that draws others into an ongoing discussion about not only who we are, but, more important, about who we want to become.

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