

On the Turn
The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative
in English

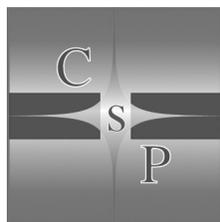
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Cover image: María Arizti studied graphic design and teacher training in Zaragoza. She currently teaches at a primary school and is an amateur publicity material designer.

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Edited by

Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina



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INTRODUCTION

THE ETHICS OF FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE IN ENGLISH

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“How should we live? [...] What are our obligations to the other creatures with whom we share this planet and to the generations of humans who will come after us?” These two questions open the entry for “ethics” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.¹ Ethics, the branch of philosophy that inquires into what is morally right or wrong, has always had in literature a powerful ally in dealing with these and other similar issues. Michael Eskin has drawn attention to the fact that “our moral education has not, fundamentally, been entrusted to ethics,” but to the myriad of fictions that interpellate us ethically throughout our lives: “Nursery rhymes, stories, plays, verbal and filmic narratives perused from early childhood have been supposed to ensure, more or less successfully, the formation of the variously conceived good person.”² Further proof of the interdependence between the two disciplines is Wittgenstein’s oft-quoted aphorism that “Ethics and aesthetics are one,” and his epiphanic realisation that “we should deliver philosophy in verse.”³

There was a time in the history of Anglo-American literary criticism in which the relationship between ethics and literature became especially intimate. Back in the thirties and well into the sixties of the twentieth century, F.R. Leavis and his followers highlighted the exemplary nature of the “great tradition” of English literature, and developed a particular brand

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 492.

² Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” 574.

³ In Stengel, 624. For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between ethics and literature in general and Wittgenstein’s contribution to the debate in particular, see Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” Eaglestone, and Stengel.

of ethical criticism in order to distil its timeless moral truths. With the boom of Literary Theory in the sixties, seventies and eighties, Leavis's methods gradually fell into disuse. The tenets of (post)structuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction and the various forms of ideological criticism that dominated the academia in those decades, were utterly incompatible with the universalising tendency of Leavis's moral criticism. The political vanquished the ethical, associated with the old liberal-humanist tradition from which literary critics were now trying to disengage themselves: "Widely regarded as an ideological mask concealing the will to power of dominant groups in society, ethics ended up an object of contempt, ridicule and abuse."⁴

However, as the contributions to the present volume prove, ethical criticism dies hard. In fact, this collective work is a product of the so-called "turn to ethics" that has characterised the humanities in general and literary studies in particular since the late 1980s. According to those critics who have mapped and documented the phenomenon, this renewed interest in ethics has been partly motivated by the excessive radicalism and relativism dictated by some forms of Theory. In the words of Christina Kotte: "The infinite deferral of solid foundations, including moral categories, principles, and codes," appears to some as "dangerous, irresponsible relativism."⁵ The critical scandal brought about by the discovery of anti-Semitic remarks in Paul De Man's wartime writings meant one more nail in the coffin of deconstructive criticism. This reaction against the alleged excesses of poststructuralism has run parallel to a concern with fiction on the part of some contemporary moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre and the late Richard Rorty. In their opinion, the perfect blend of the particular and the universal that informs literature makes of it a potent vehicle for ethics. "Interestingly," states Michael Eskin, "the [...] 'turn to ethics' [...] in parts of the humanities [...] has its counterpart in (moral) philosophy's 'turn to literature.'"⁶ As he puts it, "ethics *needs* literature [...] to be fully integrated into the human and the social domain that it is ultimately concerned with."⁷ Literature, a "more 'capacious,' more universal *and* concrete [...] sign"⁸ translates abstract philosophical concepts into something that can "make us *see* and *feel* [...] in a way no philosophical

⁴ Craps, 6.

⁵ Kotte, 65.

⁶ Eskin, "On Literature and Ethics," 581, fn. 20.

⁷ Eskin, "On Literature and Ethics," 588.

⁸ Attridge, in Eskin, "On Literature and Ethics," 588.

treatise can.”⁹ The synergies between the two disciplines are no novelty indeed, but can be traced back to the origins of philosophy. Eskin mentions Plato’s recourse to Homer in the *Republic* as a well-known example.¹⁰

Is this turn to ethics, then, simply a retro fashion, and thus a confirmation—an extension, rather—of Robert Scholes’s belief that there is nothing new under the “critical” sun? Yes and no. “It is time to go back to Leavis.” This somewhat provocative statement begins Andrew Gibson’s *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. Like Leavis, the practitioners of the return to ethics believe in the power of fiction to affect readers: “I would want to sustain and argue for a sense of the ethical importance of novels in themselves, of reading novels, of valuing certain novels in certain ways.”¹¹ But Gibson draws upon Leavis mainly to engage in a critical dialogue with him. In fact, the kind of ethical criticism he advocates has very little in common with the Leavisite approach to literature. Far from searching for a “stable base of moral constants and universal” in fiction,¹² what Gibson defends is an ethical theory renewed by the insights of deconstruction.

These divergent views show that the (re)turn to ethics is no homogeneous movement. Most chroniclers of the turn seem to agree on the coexistence of two main trends within contemporary ethical inquiry.¹³ Robert Eaglestone speaks of two “wings”: “roughly, a more narrative-based neo-Aristotelian ‘wing’ and a more deconstructive ‘wing.’”¹⁴ Stef Craps summarises the situation graphically in the following terms:

⁹ McGinn, in Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” 588.

¹⁰ Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” 588. In fact, Eskin, drawing on Jakobson, goes so far as to question the very distinction between literature and philosophy that stems from Aristotle’s differentiation between apophantic and nonapophantic modes of speech (“On Literature and Ethics,” 577, 581).

¹¹ Gibson, 1.

¹² Kotte, 62.

¹³ Although both Andrew Gibson and Christina Kotte distinguish between three distinct groups of ethically-informed critics—(neo)humanists, moral philosophers and deconstructionists—the first two groups could be subsumed into one due to the similarity of their interests. This is in fact what Kotte herself suggests doing. See Gibson, 5-13 and Kotte, 64-72. Lawrence Buell offers an even wider range of nuance in his classifying contemporary ethical criticism into six different strands (Buell, “Introduction,” 7-11). However, the description of the six categories is still pervaded by the two main axes around which the turn to ethics seems to be structured: one pointing back to liberal humanism and the moral criticism of Arnold and Leavis, and the other informed by postmodernism and deconstruction.

¹⁴ Eaglestone, 595.

Those on the right claim that the “restoration” of ethics to its “rightful place” in contemporary discourse would produce a return to central or essential “values” helping to revitalize a degenerate humanism and reaffirm a battered tradition; while for many on the left, ethics names the obligation to empower the hitherto deprived, silenced, or colonized other.¹⁵

In the ranks of the first group we find names like Wayne Booth, David Parker, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, among others, who are committed, albeit in different forms, to the regeneration of the values of liberal humanism, still suffering from the wounds inflicted by Literary Theory. Not surprisingly, their concerns echo those of Leavis’s moral criticism. Critics siding with the second group have charged them with selling old wine in new bottles and encouraging a pre-structuralist understanding of ethics that neglects the “various problematizations of narrative and narrative ‘form.’”¹⁶ To use Geoffrey Harpham’s famous distinction between ethics—“the strictly undecidable,” an open field of enquiry—and morality—the particular set of rules one must follow—, what these critics are actually practising is moral rather than ethical criticism.¹⁷ However, although it is true that their practices stress the retro character of the ethical turn, it is also true that they are aware that deconstruction and poststructuralism have not been in vain, and that it is now virtually impossible to return to an ethics of universals and solid foundations.¹⁸

The guru of the second main trend within the turn to ethics is Emmanuel Levinas, whose ethical philosophy is drawn upon to demonstrate that some forms of deconstruction and poststructuralism blend well with an ethical reading of texts and that a post-foundational ethics is not only possible but also preferable. J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Harpham, Drucilla Cornell, Andrew Gibson and Christopher Falzon, among others, have aligned themselves with this theoretically informed brand of ethics. For them, Literary Theory is not inimical to ethics, but is rather what makes an in-depth regeneration of ethics possible. To sum up the interests of this second group: they combine the insights of Literary Theory—a mistrust of foundations and master narratives, an utter undecidability, and a concern for textuality—with the preoccupations of Levinas, aptly summarised by Eskin in the following list of “buzzwords

¹⁵ Craps, 6.

¹⁶ Gibson, 11.

¹⁷ Kotte, 68-69.

¹⁸ Kotte, 67.

and *topoi*”: “*alterity, interpellation, call of the other, answerability, ethical responsibility, openness, obligation, event, doing justice, witnessing, hospitality, singularity, particularity, or the gift.*”¹⁹ The writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—two of the most outstanding figures of the Theoretical Era—have also contributed to relegitimizing “ethics talk.”²⁰ The former, through his “reevaluation of the category of the self, conceiving of care of the self as an ethical project,”²¹ and the latter, by engaging in a fruitful dialogue with Levinas: “the thought of Emmanuel Levinas has awakened us [to a conception of] an ‘unlimited’ responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom.”²²

Levinas’s ethical philosophy is primarily concerned with the “relationship with the Other, the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other.”²³ The Face of the Other, which summons us into ethics even before we are constituted as beings, is marked by radical difference. Any attempts by the Self to approach the Other—for whom we are always already responsible—must, therefore, respect this inescapable otherness, if they are to be deemed ethical. A generous openness to the Other—be it sentient creature or text—permeates J. Hillis Miller’s responsible reading, Andrew Gibson’s “ethics of sensibility” and Christopher Falzon’s “social dialogue,” the three of them attempts at reshaping ethics outside foundationalism. For Miller, “there is a necessary ethical moment in [the] act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical”;²⁴ Gibson articulates his ethics of sensibility around a concrete way of being in the world characterised by vulnerability and compassion,²⁵ and Falzon encourages a dialogical ethics that “involves choosing to adopt an attitude of openness towards the other, being open to different perspectives and to ways of acting which challenge the prevailing forms.”²⁶

Obviously, not all critics have welcomed the current ethical turn with the same eagerness. In some instances, their reasons for resistance are simply terminological, but in others, their discontent hints at weightier matters. In the opinion of Michael Eskin and Robert Eaglestone,

¹⁹ Eskin, “Introduction,” 561; original emphasis.

²⁰ Buell, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics,” 2.

²¹ Buell, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics,” 2.

²² Derrida’s “Adieu” to Levinas in Buell, “Introduction,” 9.

²³ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 45.

²⁴ Miller, 1.

²⁵ See Gibson, 161-185.

²⁶ Falzon, 6.

contemporary literary criticism has never ceased to be ethical, not even during the Theoretical Era, so, why, then, call this a turn? As Eskin puts it, “what may have felt or seemed like a turn at the time appears, from the vantage point of the present, more like a noticeable turbulence in the path of modern intellectual history than a (radical) veering off from hitherto accepted intellectual practices implied in the notion of ‘turn.’”²⁷ Others, like Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe, are wary of the new forms of ethical inquiry because they fear they will mean the demise of political engagement and “a certain heightening of moralism” in literary and cultural criticism.²⁸ What Lawrence Buell seems to mistrust about the current revival of ethics is its heterogeneity, what he calls its “omnibus” character. Talking about the call for papers for the special issue of *PMLA* devoted to ethical criticism, he complains that “the challenge of pinning down what counts as ethics intensifies as more parties lay claim to it,” and that “there is no unitary ethics movement, no firm consensus among MLA members who think of themselves as pursuing some form of ethically valenced inquiry.”²⁹ However, while Buell chooses to stress the “cacophony”³⁰ of this “pluriform discourse,”³¹ we take a different turn, and revel in the polyphonic nature of the turn to ethics. The advantages of the “crossover”³² among disciplines, interests, discourses and practices, brought about by the phenomenon, amply make up for the putative loss of critical edge. Like the editors of *The Turn to Ethics*, we also regard contemporary ethical criticism as “a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves and ‘others.’”³³

In spite of this undeniable and challenging diversity—which the polyphony of the present volume appropriately illustrates—we do wonder, as did Garber, Hanssen and Walkowitz: “What kind of a turn is the turn to ethics? A Right turn? A Left turn? A wrong turn? A U-turn? Whose turn? Whose turn is it to turn to ethics? And why? Why now?”³⁴ Ethics is, here and elsewhere, variously and creatively understood as inevitably associated to or radically different from morality; as traditional, postmodern or postpostmodern; as specific to a context or universal to the

²⁷ Eskin, “Introduction,” 558. See also Eaglestone, 596.

²⁸ Butler, 15. See also Mouffe, 85-95.

²⁹ Buell, “Introduction,” 7.

³⁰ Buell, “Introduction,” 11.

³¹ Buell, “Introduction,” 7.

³² Garber et al, ix.

³³ Garber et al, viii.

³⁴ Garber et al, vii.

human condition; as the means or the end of critical interpretation; as centred or decentred, and ultimately recentred; as behind all debates or beyond further debate; as needing definition or as escaping any fixed definition by definition. There is plenty of talking and writing about the ethics of fiction, the ethics of writing, the ethics of reading, the ethics of critical interpretation, the ethics of positioning, the ethics of form, the ethics of meaning. But the ethical turn is also a turn to ethics, and thus, we necessarily look at the fiction of ethics, the writing of ethics, the reading of ethics, the critical interpretation of ethics, the positioning of ethics, the form of ethics, the meaning of ethics... The ethics of ethics seems to be an issue and the more ethical we try to get, the more questions we encounter. But, in spite of—or perhaps thanks to—the open questions, there is also a generalised and very positive attention to issues of responsibility, solidarity, and community; to the power of creativity and dialogue; to the self as being open to encounters with the other, which helps us look at our neighbours, close or distant, in ways more egalitarian and democratic. The ethical reflection is about improving our place in the world, and our relation to the world we are placed in. And we all know the search is as worthwhile as it is necessary.

In their awareness of such trends and needs, the authors included in this volume offer promising ethical dialogues that will, we hope, make a notable contribution to the ongoing ethical conversation.³⁵ The provenance of these articles is itself a promise of diversity: Germany, France, the USA, England, Israel, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Spain. Their approaches vary from general theory to particular examples, from traditional interpretations to post-deconstruction ethics. Authors analyze texts both mainstream and marginal, colonial and postcolonial; they examine the ethics of race, gender and sexuality; the ethics of self-positioning and orientation; the ethics of style; the ethics of reception; the ethics of mode and genre; the ethics of extreme situations of evil, disease, fascism.

The first part of the volume, “Framing Ethics,” articulates many of the fundamental theoretical issues involved. In his paper, ANDREW GIBSON aims briefly to develop and explain the concept of intermittency, or the understanding of the world as the doublet of event and remainder; to relate it to a certain way of thinking about modernity; to reflect on its implications for the ethics of contemporary narrative fiction; and to illustrate his case regarding that fiction with reference to J.M. Coetzee’s

³⁵ This book is the result of an anonymously peer-reviewed evaluation of articles expanded from papers given at the conference on the ethics of fiction organized by the two editors (Jaca, Huesca, 30 March-1 April 2006).

novels, choosing as examples *Age of Iron*, *Elizabeth Costello* and his most recent novel, *Slow Man*. PATRICIA WAUGH argues that the recent expansion of the biological sciences has facilitated a reorientation towards the body which allows for an understanding of the emotions as essential aspects of cognition and of rational judgement and therefore of any sustainable ethics. In her view, fiction has always worked, if implicitly, with such ethical assumptions and the novel provides an education in this kind of ethical awareness. The essay explores ways in which contemporary writers have begun to make such awareness explicit as they recognise the possibilities of a new consilience between the arts and sciences. As HEINZ ANTOR reflects in the next essay, in spite of the widespread scepticism about the possibility of coming up with an ethics of fixed or even universal norms in an age of deconstructivism and poststructuralism, the more radical postmodern attitudes of “anything goes” have by now been replaced by what has been termed the “ethical turn” of critical theory, an attempt at providing humans with ethical frameworks in a pluralist world the decentredness and fragmentation of which often creates serious problems of orientation—an attempt that does not ignore the anti-foundationalist insights of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Antor discusses some of these issues by way of an analysis of Ian McEwan’s fifth novel, *Black Dogs*, which was published in 1992 and constitutes a critical engagement with ethical questions of orientation and self-positioning in the decentred and fragmented postmodern age.

Part II, entitled “Studies in Mode,” starts with SUSANA ONEGA’s approach to *Babel Tower*. Her ethical reading of the novel leads her to analyse the way in which Byatt’s self-conscious and parodic absorption and recasting of formal narrative conventions associated with realism, such as omniscient narration, the multiplot and organic growth result not so much in a nostalgic recreation of a stable and whole patriarchal “shared world,” but, paradoxically, to depict what, following Andrew Gibson, might be described as values in the making, that is, unstable and provisional values submitted to constant negotiation and reformulation and expressing Byatt’s ambivalent attitude to patriarchal humanism.³⁶ In his essay on the ethics of romance, JEAN-MICHEL GANTEAU tackles the generally overlooked question of the ethics of mode, more specifically the ethics of romance as mode. Starting from the doxic position that has it that romance evinces very little compatibility with ethical manifestations and arguing in favour of the consubstantially ethical orientation of romance,

³⁶ Gibson, 85.

this analysis is based on a reading of Emmanuel Levinas's theory of exteriority and focuses on the categories of excedence, vulnerability and Saying (as opposed to Said). MARÍA JESÚS MARTÍNEZ-ALFARO analyses Charles Palliser's "The Medicine Man" as a satire where the practitioners of poststructuralist theory in general, and deconstruction in particular, are accused of disregarding the world, the text, and the reader, in what seems to be a challenge to poststructuralist criticism as incapable of an ethical stance. The author goes on to explain how the satire at work in "The Medicine Man" can be deconstructed, thus inviting the reader to apply the critical method which constitutes the target of the invective. This second reading can be regarded as providing a moment of "ethical transcendence," to use Simon Critchley's phrase, in that it makes us aware of a necessary other that disrupts the text's obvious message and throws a different light on satire as an "unethical" stance and on deconstruction as a methodology that rules ethics out. In the paper that follows, GABRIELLE MOYER shows the problematic consequences of our amorous transformations while she argues that through a hermeneutic attention to fiction's complex aesthetics and emotive force we gain the skills for the kind of hermeneutic and ultimately ethical attention required for understanding ourselves, shaken and inscrutable as we are, when in love. In describing ethics as a kind of attention that sustains both difficulty and wonder, Moyer argues for an ethics of fiction that extends beyond recent theories of narrative as ethical rhetoric to include poetry and the practice of poetic interpretation.

In Part III, "Visions of Multiplicity," GORDON HENRY's paper suggests that American Indians are most widely known and accepted as virtual, appropriable, imagined subjects, which is one of the key issues related to the ethics of researching and writing about American Indians. His essay reviews those imagined virtual constructs of American Indians in the light of Adam Zachary Newton's triad of narrative ethics and of Kate Shanley's cutting article on the appropriation of American Indian identity by non-Indian writers. In turn Henry offers an alternative ethic for thinking and writing about American Indians as subjects of research and literature. In the essay that follows, M. DOLORES HERRERO studies the way David Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life* brings to the fore the lethal consequences of arresting dialogue and absolutizing certain forms of life and thought, inviting the reader to meditate on the experience of otherness and alterity and on the need to endorse a dialogical ethical model. Thus, the novel, as the author of the essay argues, subtly echoes some of the most well-known current discourses on narrative ethics, which insist on our obligation to be *ethical*, that is, to engage in an open-ended dialogue

with the world and the others that will alone give tolerance and full communication a chance. ISABEL FRAILE MURLANCH explores the notion of responsibility as one of the keys to understanding the full ethical weight of Janette Turner Hospital's novels *The Last Magician* and *Oyster*, an analysis that, while accepting the basic ethical notion that the desire for personal/national power often constitutes an obstacle that may block the path to an ethical relationship with the Other, suggests that real responsibility is just as impossible without the individual's/the nation's knowledge and acceptance of such power. As the author argues, the texts ultimately suggest that it is necessary to take on responsibility for personal emotional life and for any kind of action (after all, the personal is political) before one can assume the task of transforming the realities of oppression and injustice in the world we live in. CHRIS WEEDON's paper takes up the claim that a turn to ethics is both a move away from politics and a rebuttal of the postmodern condition, using the example of fictional representations of Islam in contemporary Britain. The paper looks briefly at the question of ethics, humanism and poststructuralist critique; it then moves on to consider representations of Islam in the West and the specificity of literary and cinematic fiction. Weedon then turns to the case of Kureishi's *My Son the Fanatic*, analysing the representation of competing and conflicting values in relation to the ethics and politics of representation. In the essay that follows, RÜDIGER AHRENS applies the judicial notion of equity to colonial and post-colonial writing as an ethical principle and norm which influences the plot structure and the characters by accounting for a fundamental human right which cannot be violated or jeopardized by individuals or social bodies. In colonial literature, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* are cases in question, for here equity helps to solve or to direct legal or quasi-legal social problems on the border-line of moral systems of the colonizers and the colonized societies. The same can be said of post-colonial writings such as the novels of Salman Rushdie, Yasmine Gooneratne, Paul Theroux and Caryl Phillips or the poetry of Ping-Kwan Leung and Andrew Parkin, to name but a few of the texts that can be viewed as an appropriate site for equity's persistence and its specific ability to reconfigure the traditional tropes of supplementary relationships.

Part IV, "Political Positionings," starts with STEPHEN INGLE's claim that, even though George Orwell died more than fifty years ago, what he said can still be applied in a debate on literature and ethics in contemporary narrative, for the ethical concerns that he addressed in his last major work *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are of profound relevance to our world today, and his use of literature to champion an ethics of truth is of

continuing interest. The essay discusses the nature of Orwell's objective truth and the devices by which the state seeks to recreate this truth in its own image, noting especially the importance of the attempt actually to control language. As Ingle concludes, Orwell's novel stands as a warning against allowing the atrophy of civil society, which alone is the safeguard of objective (i.e. non political) truth and hence liberty, and to this extent his novel represents an important weapon in the battle to sustain a true representation of political reality, which is a necessary if not a sufficient guarantee of individual liberty in today's world. In the next essay on the religious-themed British sitcom of the nineties, *The Vicar of Dibley*, CHANTAL CORNUT-GENTILLE D'ARCY argues that television situation comedy is a particularly rich site for raising ethical questions for large and popular audiences: it allows for the treatment of serious subjects in ways that bring about laughter and, through this, a certain critical distance; and it is most often concerned with issues to which audiences can readily relate using a range of comic narrative strategies to heighten social and familial tensions and to question prejudices and commonsense assumptions. MÓNICA CALVO PASCUAL's paper applies James Phelan's notion of the communicative situation of narrative as an ethical situation and his imperative to root narrative ethics in narrative itself to the formal and content guidance offered by Stephen Marlowe's *Colossus; a Novel about Goya and a World Gone Mad*. As the author claims, a study of the omniscient, protean narrator helps reinforce the ethical positioning of the novel, mainly in its representation of the protagonist's alleged madness, which, in line with Deleuze and Guattari's definitions in *Anti-Oedipus*, is a strategy to denounce the neurotic society that allowed fascism to take root both in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Spain and, more significantly, during Franco's dictatorship. FRANCISCO COLLADO-RODRÍGUEZ offers an analysis of Doctorow's presentation of a pre-verbal ethical realm in *The March*. Images, implied by a heterodiegetic narrative voice that systematically avoids focalization, are used to ethically classify different characters in the novel. Some of them feel the summons of the Other and respond to it, in a way that suggests connections with Levinas's theories on the Face of the Other. Meanwhile, Doctorow also builds up an impressive historical and fictional artefact where the disasters of the American Civil War reflect on contemporary historical issues, in this manner elevating his novel to the category of moral fiction.

Part V, "The Ethics of Writing/Reading," opens with MARITA NADAL's analysis of the ongoing discrepancy that characterizes the criticism of Flannery O'Connor's work in the light of the productive and performative relationship between text, author and reader. The author

starts from the assumption that ethical criticism emphasizes two basic premises that articulate this relationship: the resistance of the text to be fixed by the reader, and the creative relationship established between the former and the latter. She also takes up Hillis Miller's argument in *The Ethics of Reading* that the text is always subject to an ethical law that cannot be read within the text, but remains in reserve, whereby it could be said that any text falsifies or mistranslates its matter. VERA NÜNNING explores the ethical implications of unreliable narration in two contemporary British novels by Ian McEwan and Nick Hornby, in which the boundaries between "reliable" and "unreliable" narrators are blurred. The danger of the reader developing sympathy for morally repulsive characters is here turned into an advantage: by presenting strange, seemingly unreliable narrators, the novels at first evoke the experience of alterity, which then begins to wear off as the "other" is made to appear more and more like the self. This new use of (un)reliability combines aspects of realist and postmodernist aesthetics: connecting the realist evocation of sympathy with life-like characters to the postmodernist experience of alterity and indeterminacy, it has produced an ethically viable aesthetics that is in tune with present-day life. In the next essay, C. NAMWALI SERPELL describes two problems haunting ethical literary criticism: a reliance on the old-fashioned idea that literature is a model for reality and an abstraction which borders on vagueness. The author then articulates a new kind of structural analogy between literary study and ethical praxis, one which focuses on uncertainty in the reading process. Her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* moves from a description of the more prominent ethical problems of the story towards Morrison's use of multiplicity to create a palimpsestic structure of narrative uncertainty. Finally, the essay addresses the way multiplicity in *Beloved* invokes particular reading practices, which in turn, suggest an ethical model of adjacency that relies on the productive power of metaphor. ADIA MENDELSON-MAOZ studies the representation of moral problems in literature and offers a new approach towards the practice of ethical criticism that combines ethics, rhetoric, and aesthetics. Following the nature of literature both as a medium of moral investigation and as an aesthetic object, the author proposes three rhetorical elements—*Multiple Narratives*, *Dissonance*, and a *Fatal Act*—which operate as key units in the structure of texts, empowering the representation of the subject and absorbing the reader into the inquiry. The theoretical presentation of each element is followed by concrete examples and a detailed application to Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. Next, SONIA BAELO ALLUÉ deals with the advantages and disadvantages that a return to ethics in literary criticism

may bring through a study of the initial reception of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. The long, detailed descriptions of torture and death in the novel fuelled an interesting public debate on issues like the influence of literature in life, the ethical role of literature or the question of censorship. By contrast with the early reception in newspapers and magazines, literary critics have written extensively on *American Psycho* but they have focused on aesthetic issues alone, virtually ignoring the ethical problems that a work like *American Psycho* poses. This article argues for a return to ethics capable of combining ethics and aesthetics, especially when we have to interpret novels like *American Psycho* where the two are so intimately connected. ÉAMONN DUNNE's closing essay examines Paul Auster's *City of Glass* as an example of an allegory of the act of responsible reading. Taking J. Hillis Miller's notion of the violent imposition of (mis)reading, the author pursues moments of responsibility dramatized in Auster's novella. In doing this, he suggests that the majority of critical studies—focusing as they invariably do on the question of identity in the work—seem to be downplaying another essential factor in Auster's novella, namely, the idea that reading cannot abide in confusion. Through a close analysis of two important moments in *City of Glass*, Dunne argues that such readings necessarily create causal sequence where there is no legitimate textual reason to do so. This is something Hillis Miller, in his important reading of Kleist in *Versions of Pygmalion*, sees as the human tendency to project concatenation and personal agency where randomness reigns.

Needless to say, no ethical search would make sense were it not to include the acknowledgment of a number of people without whom this work would not have been possible. To Susana Onega's research team on contemporary narrative in English at the University of Zaragoza (ref. H05), currently working on a project on the ethics of fiction (ref. HUM2004-00344/FIL), this volume owes everything from its inception to its final outcome, and we are grateful to each of the members for their encouragement, confidence, support and ideas. While any mistakes should be laid at the door of the editors, all merits to be found here are undoubtedly the result of creative team work. We are particularly grateful to all the contributors for their good work, which is the heart and soul of this collection, as well as for their eagerness and patience throughout the process. The opportunity to meet each and every one of them during the ethics conference in Jaca was an extremely rewarding experience that compensated us for all the tougher parts of our work. We also wish to thank our wonderful assistants who have played vital roles at the various stages of the process leading to this book: Jessica Aliaga, Laura Martínez,

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Part I
Framing Ethics

“THANKLESS EARTH, BUT NOT ENTIRELY”: EVENT AND REMAINDER IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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One of the principal points of focus in my work on narrative theory over the past fifteen years has been the concept of the narrative event, the narrative treatment of the event. By the event, I mean the random occurrence of the new in Being. The event is the occasion of the transformation of forms, the transformation of the world. It is an aleatory fragment, the chance occurrence of something that had no existence beforehand, could not be predicted or foreseen and had no prior name. The concept of the event betokens an unfounded world, a world of emergence, arrival into Being that is subject to no *a priori* determination. It can be distinguished from an accident on the one hand and a disaster (including an ethical disaster) on the other. In *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, I aimed to explore some of the ways in which narrative might indicate, render or bear witness to the event. Unlike lyric, narrative, I suggested, is a literary form that is seemingly not open and even inimical to the event. This is the case because the representational relation on which narrative is commonly founded implies an originating instance, a reality already known and given which narrative is constrained to duplicate.

From this derives Bergson's identification of narrative with closure, Heidegger's influential valorization of lyric at the expense of narrative and Levinas's critique of the ethical failure of narrative on the grounds that it neutralizes the event. Hence, too, Lyotard's postmodern circumspection with regard to narrative: for Lyotard, narrative ceaselessly recuperates alterity into a structure of repetition or resemblance and thereby pacifies the event. In the teeth of this sceptical tradition, I proposed that certain modes of narrative or narrative instances were indeed concerned with the radical singularity or incalculable hazard of the event, the event as instantaneous surprise. I argued that we needed a careful, precise,

discriminating analysis of the modes, conditions and instances of articulation of the narrative event. In *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* in particular, I also explored the ethical dimension of the narrative event, specifically with reference to Beckett. I argued that, in Levinas's radical extension of his ethics in *Otherwise than Being*, the crucial issue became precisely an ethics of the event. I understood this as the event of literary language, the possible disruption of the order of what Levinas called the Said, in which language has always proposed, ordered, constructed experience beforehand, by what he called the Saying, the sheer radicality of the event of language itself. I found in some of Beckett's work an instance of this ethical disruption.

Looking back at *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, however, I wonder, now, whether there is not present in it a certain undercurrent of the very scepticism I had tried to resist in *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*. The second book seems to me to be troubled by a sense of the sheer difficulty of thinking and writing the event that the earlier book had mooted as a difficulty only, apparently, triumphantly to surmount it. This is indicative of what I now take to be a problem with my work on the theme of the event throughout the nineties. Philosophically speaking, it seems to me now that that work too loosely and even ignorantly conflated two distinct kinds of thought about the event which finally cannot be reconciled and between which one must in some sense choose. Each of these two kinds of thought spans diverse philosophical traditions. But each of them can also be presented under a generalized rubric. Firstly, there is a thought for which the event is ubiquitous, omnipresent, originary or the condition of Being itself. This is exemplified, for instance, in the Heideggerian conception of *Ereignis*, the happening of Being, which the grand structures of a techno-scientific culture may progressively mask, but to which, in principle at least, it is always possible to hearken. The same kind of thinking about the event is exemplified, if very differently, in the Deleuzian conception of Being as pure becoming, of time as a measureless, incommensurable continuum out of which the present continually emerges, in and as an infinite production of discrete events. This kind of thought has also recently been evident in what I call the social-democratic conception of the event; that is, of the event as mundane, diurnal, always and everywhere present and to hand. This is a conception of the event that Simon Critchley has recently defended.

In contradistinction to this conception of the event, I have become progressively more interested in a different thought of the event apparent, to a greater or lesser extent, in the work of a range of contemporary, chiefly French philosophers, notably Badiou, Rancière, Jambet, Lardreau,

Françoise Proust and Daniel Bensaïd, though they also have their predecessors, notably Kant (in a certain reading of parts of his work) and, perhaps above all, Benjamin. I have recently developed this interest in a book called *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency*. The book centres on the extremely complex intellectual relationship between two major modern oeuvres. Its successor, *Logics of Intermittency: Event and Remainder in Contemporary French Philosophy*, is now in preparation. The rest of this essay is more or less directly related to it. In what follows, I aim briefly to explain what I mean by thinking intermittency; to relate it to a certain way of thinking about modernity; to reflect on its implications for the ethics of contemporary narrative fiction; and finally to exemplify my case with reference to the work of J.M. Coetzee, choosing as my examples *Age of Iron*, *Elizabeth Costello* and his most recent novel, *Slow Man*.

According to my conception of it, the event is rare. It does not have to happen and, most of the time, does not happen. In other words, events are intermittent and punctual. A full account of the logic for the decision in favour of this conception of the event is beyond the scope of this essay, but I would briefly stress four features of it: firstly, the event properly speaking appears as a rupture or break with an established order (aesthetic, political, psychic, etc). In this sense, the event is not an operation of difference, but rather what arrives to make a difference. The event is defined by what Christian Jambet calls “abrogation,”¹ that is, a setting aside of a given order of assumption, thought, knowledge or understanding. The second and related feature is that the event is or involves an encounter with or a manifestation of the void in all its mundanity. The event is an intimate if fleeting experience of the absence of all foundation or ground. It is this that crucially distinguishes it from supposedly religious or visionary experience, from the spiritual and to some extent the romantic epiphany. In the first instance if not at length, the event is not marked as a moment of revelation but as a moment of radical loss, what Badiou calls subtraction. Thirdly, and crucially, the event has consequences; that is, it sets certain procedures or sequences in motion, and requires adherences, or what Badiou calls fidelities of its subjects. Fourthly, the event is a principle of innovation. It is transformative, not in that it necessarily involves the wholesale, revolutionary metamorphosis of a given situation, but in that it inaugurates not just sequences, but new sequences, sequences which are “extravagantly undetermined,” to use a mathematical phrase of the kind

¹ See Jambet, 70-73.

dear to Badiou;² that is, the sequences in question have escaped confinement in already available forms.

Thus, if we merely restrict our attention to the four domains of the event with which Badiou is concerned—love, art, politics and science—it is clear that, in the case of Galilean physics, Mallarmé’s inauguration of modernist poetics, the French Revolution or the relatively commonplace event of falling in love, the event arrives to transform a situation that not only was blind to it but could not have predicted its coming; a situation (pre-Galilean cosmology, Victorian poetics, the *ancien régime*, the inertia of life before love) whose actual groundlessness, whose foundation on nothing save the void, is exposed precisely in the event. The event initiates a sequence whose trajectory is in principle indeterminate and open-ended. The obvious instance of a conception of history in terms of events and sequences might be the kind of understanding of modern politics promoted by Badiou in *Conditions*: modern politics is a series of sequences originating in events: the French Revolution from the Montagnard Convention from 1792 to 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794); 1848 to 1871 (from the Communist Manifesto to the defeat of the Commune); 1902-1917 (Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* to the October Revolution); 1928-1949 (Mao’s earliest writings to the Communist takeover in China). These are Badiou’s examples. We might also add, say, the Cuban revolution, the Solidarity movement in Poland in the early 80s, and so on.

Yet the political instance immediately raises another issue: if indeed, these intermittent, rare, scattered sequences of events are what constitute modern politics, then the logical corollary of that must be an account of the normative political condition as one of inertia. The same would apply *mutatis mutandis* in the worlds of love, art and science: the event apart, the common story must be one of reaction or stasis. In other words, the event according to my second conception of it must imply what I call a remainder. The remainder is precisely what the event appears to disrupt. I choose the abstract, neutral-sounding word “remainder” in conformity with the kind of philosophical vocabularies to be found in the work of Badiou or Jambet. But what I mean is most vividly evoked by Walter Benjamin’s concept of “catastrophe in permanence.”³ My argument here hinges on Badiou’s particular conception of the event—particular, for instance, not least, in that it is a rationalist conception of the event emphatically distinct from messianic ones, including Benjamin’s—and a Benjaminian conviction of the historical reality of “catastrophe in

² Pollard, 40.

³ For what Benjamin means by this, see “Central Park,” 161-199, *passim*.