

Ethics of Reading

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Summary and Keywords

The ethics of reading connects with but is not identical to the field of ethical criticism. Often pursued as a normative inquiry into morality, ethics may be better understood in historical terms. From this point of view, the inquiry into ethics is not a matter of good and evil (or universal moral correctness) but rather of understanding historically variable and socially conditioned regimes of subjective self-construction (ethics). Thus, moral thought may be taken to be one specific modality of the ethical, not its essential feature. A social and historical inquiry into the ethics of reading must then examine the ethical impulse itself, the recurring attraction of ethical questions, normative moral claims, and the search for moral models in literary and cultural texts. Various strands of ethical criticism have treated literary characters as approximations of persons or have considered the way reading itself may be a morally healthful act. Understanding these approaches and their limitations helps one recognize an alternative ethics of reading, focused on the social and historical reconstruction of the category of the ethical, as well as a more specifically literary-critical style of reading, focused on a single ethical injunction: fidelity to the object of critical attention.

Keywords: reading, ethics, criticism, character, psychoanalysis, Marxism, Aristotle, Foucault, Gramsci, Adorno

You stand in front of a Velasquez portrait and you say: “What a marvellous likeness,” and you feel that you have really said something about the painting. Likeness? Of whom? Of no one, of course. You have no idea whom it represents, perhaps you can never find out; and if you could, you would care very little. Yet you feel that it is a likeness.

—Georg Lukács, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1910)

From Ethical Reading to Reading for Ethics

Aesthetic objects, and literary texts in particular, would seem to offer nothing special in relation to ethical questions, at least insofar as texts are *made things* like any other. In the first instance, an ethics of literature might concern itself with the best way of *making* a literary text (an ethics of writing, say) rather than scouring them all for clues for living

the good life. Yet since at least Aristotle's *Poetics*, with its concentration on the ethico-aesthetic force of tragedy, ethical criticism has returned to literature like the proverbial dog, and one understands why even if one recognizes the limitations of its sense of the object.¹ Accompanied by a variegated but nevertheless identifiable set of axioms about character, action, and the nature of representation, ethical criticism has wanted to see in literature a model of the world, and it has worked hard to do so. Above all, ethical criticism has insisted on identifying the *right* way of doing things; in literature, and in literary reading, it has sought a font of moral action.

Well, let us not go so far as to say (in an Aristotelian register) that criticism, which can be bad in many ways, is good only in one, even if we admit that failure is more common than success. It may be wiser in any case to cut our Aristotle with a measure of Tolstoy and recall that in practice critics have learned as much from the idiosyncrasies of putative failure ("excess and defect," as Aristotle would say) as they have from examples of undisputed critical success (the "excellence" of the "mean").² For any consideration of the category of the ethical in our time would have to begin with a fully historical concept of the good, or at least a conceptual history of it; and a little bit of history quickly opens a leak in the hermetic system of ethical criticism, not so much draining out the ethics and morality as drawing in more and more history, so that the ethical paradigm dissolves at manifold sites simultaneously. The problem here is that the Aristotelian ethics of the transhistorical or paradigmatic "good" is itself a historical precipitate: "the morality of the master, created for the virtues of the master."³ Like all concepts, then, the good must be understood as a socially conditioned production; but ethics-as-morality purports to be a kind of meta-concept, one with the ambition of orienting all aspects of our thinking and action. (Indeed, this is the very definition of deontology, the technical philosophical term for morality.) One might even say that this tendency toward full saturation or blanketing of both "pure" and "practical" reason is itself an index of the master-class origins of Aristotelian ethics: a view of the social order from the top, with confidence in its capacity to enforce universal standards purged of the lower materials of the body (and, to be sure, cleansed of the problem of economic necessity itself). Rooted in the ancient slave society, normative morality (with its accent on the division between good and bad) would continuously reproduce, in miniature, the inequality of which it was born.

An alternative understanding of the ethical therefore holds more promise, even if it cannot deliver the omnipotent satisfactions of morality itself. That second perspective has been most effectively crystallized in modern times by Michel Foucault, in his treatment of ethics as a practice, a technique of self-making or ideological formation. Foucault describes such an ethics as an "attitude," "a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; . . . a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time makes a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task."⁴ The task of reading for ethics, then, is detached from the (Aristotelian) demand that one find a *moral model* in the text and rerouted toward a genealogical account of the formation and reformation of the ethical itself: "a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents."⁵ Ethics is thus defined in terms of the relationship of the subject with itself, or "the kind of relationship

you are supposed to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, . . . which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions.”⁶ Based in Foucault’s observations of Enlightenment philosophical culture, this ethical turning may be understood as a dismissal of the master-class logic inherent to ancient morality and its epigones, even while it reinstates the master position, now both within and outside the subject—a subject that is henceforth fully historical precisely to the degree that it constitutes itself through (historically determined) ethical regimes.

The reader will have noticed a shift in usage between Aristotle and Foucault, from *ethical reading* to *reading for ethics*. Insofar as Foucault writes a Nietzschean genealogy of contemporary morality, he also endorses a style of historical self-understanding that resonates unevenly with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the inventory. For Gramsci, experience (including inherited ideologies) shapes one according to a specific organization of ideological materials but without providing a legible record of these components. The task of historical self-understanding is to produce the inventory one lacks. Self-criticism and self-consciousness can make a certain “unity” or coherence of thinking, but this self-consciousness depends upon the development of the inventory, which is a form of critical self-awareness based upon learning the “infinity of traces” through which our thinking is shaped historically. Philosophers, as a professional category of intellectuals, are often closer than others to having such an inventory (however imperfect, and typically grounded in ruling-class thought) because of their attention to their intellectual formation.⁷ At the same time, for Gramsci every person is a “philosopher” insofar as everyone is always engaged in a lived, practical, and intellectual relation to the world. One produces one’s *conception* of the world in relation to lived problems, but that conception is mediated by existing and inherited modes of thought.⁸ For Gramsci, the lived rationality he calls “common sense” may tend toward a Foucauldian “ethics” in two divergent directions: toward order (which he identifies with the best of philosophical thought, or “good sense”), or toward fragmentation (which he identifies with religion, or the disintegration of “common sense” into a codified but misguided order).⁹ Whereas Foucault’s view of ethics imagines a coherent object (the ethical regime) keyed to cohesive historical periods or epochs (similar to those representational and epistemological regimes that, in an earlier phase, Foucault referred to as *epistemes*), Gramsci’s account of the work of self-consciousness insists upon the incoherence and fragmentation of any spontaneous thought, which includes unconscious thought and action as well as institutional behavior. Coherent thinking emerges through the work of self-criticism, through the production of the inventory. From one point of view, Gramsci produces a Marxist version of the “care of the self,” reiterating the Foucauldian object at the level of the struggle of the dominated subject against the ruling class. But one may also see in Gramsci a dialectical advance beyond Foucault’s closed ethical systems, since the injunction to “know thyself” is rendered in a fully historical mode. And here my neutral descriptions of “the subject” and the first-person plural must give way to a clearer division between ruling and dominated classes. For self-knowledge is shaped by the experience of struggle at the level of thought itself: a struggle schematized in the clash (and also the fitful, uneven synthesis) between ruling-class ideas and the oppressed subject’s practical experience of social life. The inventory

will be incomplete and always unfinished, but there is no other choice than to continually *produce* it if one is to gain ground against the enemy: in this case, to make explicit the coherent worldview of the oppressed. To approach the question from the other direction, from the assumption of the unity of ethical regimes within historical periods, is to commit what Louis Althusser called the fallacy of “historicism,” by which he meant something like the very opposite of truly historical thinking: the notion that, for a given historical period, all aspects of the social formation (from the economic to the juridical and ideological) will line up evenly in a spontaneous whole.¹⁰

Foucault and Gramsci are incompatible thinkers in many ways, but together they help clarify concepts. Rather than positing and then discovering the ethics of the good in the texts one reads, one may orient oneself toward (1) the historical analysis of distinct ethical regimes, (2) the recognition of those ethical regimes as fractured by the social conflict between oppressors and oppressed (in addition to fractions within the ruling classes themselves), and (3) the accent on the lived, active work of rendering a dynamic inventory of historical ethics. The yield of this reorientation is a dialectical turn. What is given up with the confidence of master-class normative ethics is gained in the command of the historical materials; but that command is itself appropriately muted through recognition of the fraught and fragmented status of all ethical thought, including the radical injunction to produce the inventory. To speak of the “ethics of reading,” then, will mean (1) historically, to given an account of socially divergent ethical regimes of reading (many ethics, not one); and (2) to insist on only one normative point: fidelity to the object of reading, now defined dynamically (for literary criticism) as both the text and its historical determinants.¹¹

The Ethical Impulse

But to reorient the discussion in this way risks short-circuiting the process of understanding with which this article began—and that is intrinsic to its definition of ethics of reading. For one lesson from the reading of literary and cultural texts in traditional ethical terms has been to learn from its failures, and perhaps especially from the persistent attraction of the ethical impulse itself. Within literary criticism and theory, that attraction has been articulated typically in terms drawn from Aristotle and Immanuel Kant and routed through Anglophone or analytic philosophy, including some of its contemporary cognitive and neuroscientific epigones.¹² These ethical approaches to literature and culture have focused primarily on narrative fiction and have examined the thematics of character and action: that is, what characters do in narratives, how their actions are connected with their moral bearing or attitude toward other characters, and how readers may or may not associate characters’ actions and morality with their own. Ethical criticism’s attention to narrative has been most often based on the sense that, from a certain viewpoint, narratives appear to be more like “life” than non-narrative texts and that narratives therefore are most appropriately understood as models, dioramas, or laboratories of lived experi-

ence. Such a viewpoint itself may be queried, perhaps most effectively in the terms of an anecdote of Ludwig Wittgenstein's teaching by the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe:

He once greeted me with the question: 'Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun went round the earth rather than that the earth turned on its axis?' I replied: 'I suppose, because it looked as if the sun went round the earth.' 'Well,' he asked, 'what would it have looked like if it had *looked* as if the earth turned on its axis?' This question brought it out that I had hitherto given no relevant meaning to 'it looks as if' in 'it looks as if the sun goes round the earth.'¹³

In a non-trivial way, questions about the validity or intellectual usefulness of ethical criticism pivot on the relevant meaning of "it looks as if."

Ethical critics often have wished to say that it looks as if literary texts model or rehearse styles of moral living. That commitment to moral interpretation, to an understanding of "ethics" as a matter of codifying or exemplifying the good life (whether positively or negatively), takes two forms. The first depends upon the conflation of literary characters with human beings. According to Kenneth Womack, who has summarized this line of thought in a valuable précis, the ethical critic "examines the ways in which literary characters respond to the divergent forces they encounter in the fictional landscapes that they occupy. Their human behaviours and actions provide the interpretive basis for moral reflexion and conclusion."¹⁴ But in seeking models of action in fictional characters (or, for that matter, nonfictional ones), one finds one's optic rudely shattered in its first application to social life, since for any significant practical question a universalist ethics requires, as Fredric Jameson has noted, a "stable class context" and equally secure subject or agent. Subtracted from the moral approach, then, are precisely those situations of most pressing concern, in which individuals *do not* "face each other as conscious and responsible moral or rational agents, or in which such an autonomous individual or subject confronts [their] own self or personal development." Moral matters are thus superseded by "a literature and a criticism of a more political or psychological cast," and ethical criticism is left embarrassingly without its desired moral compass in precisely those circumstances for which it would have mattered most, facing instead "a relationship to some determining force vaster than the self or any individual, . . . with politics and the movement of history," and beyond the limits of "autonomous reason."¹⁵ Similarly, and at a higher level of abstraction, any ethical approach to the literary text and its characters will have already, in its first methodological gesture, looked right through the mediation of form to grasp at the phantom persons configured into the character system or plot; and in treating the literary text as a laboratory or pantomime in this way, ethical criticism will have failed to register its own object, which is none other than the text itself. "To be a character," as John Frow puts it in a powerful aphorism, "is to have a textual existence and, momentarily, to appear to exist beyond it."¹⁶ Fastening itself to the mere flicker of reference, disoriented by the mediation of a literary form it cannot see but which distorts its vision (like a lens ground with jumbled component measurements), ethical criticism fails to get a grip on the strange substance of both characters and persons.

In the second case, emblemized by the otherwise divergent approaches of Wayne C. Booth and J. Hillis Miller, who remain the twin monuments of ethical criticism, the accent shifts from the character as such to the “encounter” between the text and the reader, an encounter in which some undefined space of becoming may be opened through the “event” of reading. The reader is transformed (or, in a more dialectical view, perhaps, transforms herself) by being dynamically directed toward moral value through “reading” as a quintessentially “human” process. For Booth, who takes a more strictly rhetorical position on reading, value emerges out of the encounter between the ethos of the narrative (or the “storyteller”) and the divergent (already-existing) ethos of the reader. For Miller, whose approach to rhetorical reading rehearses the lessons of Jacques Derrida’s philosophy, reading is most properly understood as a rupture or break: open-ended, indeterminate, and therefore (for Miller) the occasion for the emergence of moral value as such. For both critics, the literary text (and the notion of “reading” expands to include multiple modalities of engagement: from reading literary texts to viewing films to engaging with narratives of all kinds in all media) is above all constituted in and through reading as alterity, as an ongoing encounter with difference itself.¹⁷

Outside Ethics: *Sinthomatic* Reading

Despite the imaginative range of some particular readings, at the root of most modes of ethical criticism are linked assumptions about self-knowledge, intention, and action: namely, that an individual subject’s intentions may be understood with more or less clarity by that subject, and that the subject may act consistently on the basis of its intention and self-understanding. Furthermore, the unit of analysis or understanding is the *individual* subject, whose encounter with the world “outside” itself is posited as just that: an engagement between a more or less fully fashioned individual and a multitude of externalities or merely “objective” conditions and dilemmas, what Marx called (following Hegel) “external necessity.”¹⁸ Among other things, the philosophical foundation for this view—even in its Millerian, deconstructionist guise—cannot withstand the scrutiny of what Raymond Geuss has called “outside ethics,” as in the key example of Hegel’s social understanding of the dialectical relationship between the subjective and the objective, which is “concerned with the real results and actual consequences of human action, not with everyone’s subjective intentions.”¹⁹

At the same time, styles of thought that may seem incompatible with ethics understood in the Aristotelian, Kantian, or analytic fashions have also been grafted onto ethical readings of texts. So, for example, a reader may find reflections of psychoanalytic principles in a character’s behavior, feeling, or thought in a way that dispenses with the simpleminded unity of intention and action. But in these cases, the introduction of the category of the unconscious as a *thematic* issue in a text only reorganizes the *kind* of ethical positioning purportedly to be found in the text; it tends to do little to alter the critical paradigm itself.

A radical and therefore exceptionally illuminating example of this mode of reading, one that produces a new paradigm while hewing closely to (if not remaining within) the tradi-

tional characterological mode, is Lee Edelman's account of the *sinthomosexual* in his book *No Future*. Given that it appears to be at once diametrically opposed to and perfectly aligned with ethical criticism, Edelman's argument is worth an extended discussion. Edelman draws on the psychoanalytic concept of the *sinthome*, the term Lacan develops for the subject's particular way of knotting together the three registers of Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. (The word is pronounced, in French, identically to *symptom*, but Lacan uses an archaic French spelling to mark the difference.) For Lacan, the *sinthome* emerges specifically in the context of psychosis, in which the Symbolic register has "come free" from the three-part knot, though his argument evolves to suggest that the *sinthome* may be a more broadly applicable category for nonpsychotic subjects as well. The *sinthome* is the subject's way of "mending" the knot, enabling the three registers "to go on holding together." Crucially, the *sinthome* does not "go on forming the knot" but instead "maintain[s] itself in a position that *looks like* [*il ait l'air*] it is forming a trefoil knot."²⁰ Edelman imports Lacan's concept into the context of the contemporary US culture of anti-queer, heteronormative "reproductive futurity" to argue that the queer subject functions within this social formation as a *sinthome*: the figure for the "mending" that is "the necessary condition for the subject's engagement of Symbolic reality" that also "refuses the Symbolic logic that determines the exchange of signifiers" and thus "carries nothing of meaning."²¹ In other words, in Edelman's usage the queer is the figure for the universal "unbinding" of the subject; the queer is the *sinthome* of the heteronormative society of reproductive futurity: banned from the heteronormative zone of meaning because it is essential to its very construction.

For the literary critic interested in ethical criticism, the significant move comes with Edelman's reference to the literary and cultural text, which provides the argument with the space and occasion to construct and elaborate its concepts. In a tour-de-force reading of Alfred Hitchcock's film *North by Northwest*, Edelman isolates the character of Leonard as the perfect figure of the *sinthome*, the quintessence of the *sinthomosexual*. With great subtlety, Edelman explores the complex queer coding of Leonard within the film, homing in on the climactic scene at Mount Rushmore, when Leonard attempts, with significant enjoyment or *jouissance*, to pry Roger Thornhill's grip from the mountain's edge, even at the risk (and the result) of plunging to his own death. Leonard thus registers the negativity of the death drive in his capacity to activate or actualize Thornhill's own surplus enjoyment (Thornhill's impossible "wish" to fall to his death). Edelman performs a close reading that also lifts Leonard out of the film, positioning him on the threshold between Hitchcock's diegesis and the viewer's world. Notice the shift, in the following passage, in Edelman's writing from *reference* (the queer as figure of the *sinthome*) to *text* (Leonard as figure) and back again:

To embrace the impossibility, the inhumanity of the *sinthomosexual*: that, I suggest, is the ethical task for which queers are singled out. Leonard affords us no lesson in how to follow in his footsteps, but calls us, beyond desire, to a *sinthomosexuality* of our own—one we assume at the price of the very identity named by 'our own.' To those on whom his ethical stance, his act, exerts a compulsion, Leonard bequeaths the irony of trying to read him as an allegory, as one from

whom we could learn how to act and in whom we could find the *sinthomosexual's* essential concretization: the formalization of a resistance to the constant conservation of forms, the substantialization of a negativity that dismantles every substance.²²

On the one hand, Edelman effectively supersedes traditional approaches to ethics and character. Without reference to the literary text, Edelman's account of the *sinthomosexual* spurs a new kind of attention to the construction of social subjects, showing how the formation of the normative subject may *preclude* the full subjectivization of others, others who are forced to *function* within the economy of normative subject formation. In this way, Edelman's social theory of queerness (silently) builds on Frantz Fanon's analysis of the theft of the black unconscious by colonial white-supremacist societies. In Fanon's account, the primary repression that had been understood (since Freud) to be a fundamental property of psychic subjects is foreclosed for the colonized subject, since what would be repressed is instead played out directly, explicitly, and materially in real social and economic life.²³ For Edelman and Fanon (and for Gramsci), a theory of intersubjective ethics predetermined by the assumption that subjects encounter other subjects *as* subjects is doomed to miss the stark fact of social power. As Saidiya Hartman puts it in her study of the US culture of slavery, in an appropriately interrogative mood:

suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy?²⁴

Edelman, Fanon, and Hartman refigure the very category of *person*, which for all three exists in deep intimacy with the category of the imaginary, fantasy, and textual *character*.

But on the other hand, as a mode of literary-critical reading, Edelman's argument produces Leonard as an ethical *model*: in this case, the figure of an anti-figure, the negative allegory of negativity, the "formalization of a resistance to the constant conservation of forms." The upshot is a highly sophisticated and generative reading (and a true advance in a whole range of literary-critical problems) that nevertheless does not differ so much from Wayne Booth's description of the relationship between a reading subject and its various potential characterological models:

Some of the roles open to me as I move through the field of selves that my cultural moment provides will be good for 'me/us,' some not so good, some literally fatal. It will be the chief and most difficult business of my life to grope my way along dimly lit paths, hoping to build a life-'plot' that will be in one of the better genres.²⁵

Booth and Edelman are incompatible at the highest level of abstraction, perhaps, with divergent assumptions about the nature of the human subject, psychological structure, the sources of social antagonism, and the very definition of "the good" (among other things). And certainly, Edelman is sharply attuned to the problem of reference in his account of

the *sinthomosexual*, whence his insistence that Leonard is an anti-allegory rather than an allegory. Yet the basic procedure remains the same: the character is the occasion for a reflection on real persons; the critic's role is to produce an account of the subject (or Booth's self) through an account of character: an account that is enabled rather than annihilated by the "literally fatal" effect or "impossibility" and "inhumanity" of the resulting ethical position.²⁶

The consideration of ethics and character thus deposits the reader far from the reading lessons of Foucault and Gramsci, and closer to the moral ground of Aristotle: not in matters of ethical *content*, but rather in the essential *form* of argument. The text is conscripted into service, in these accounts, as a moral instrument, albeit in the mode of a certain anti-morality. The problem of reference may be disturbed here, but it is not overcome, and the basic assumption remains that literary characters (and literary texts) may somehow stand for persons. One is left, in the words of Georg Lukács in the epigraph to this article, trying to find a resemblance between the Velasquez portrait and some real sitter—and therefore perhaps wondering why one is looking at paintings (reading texts, watching films) at all.

Fidelity to the Object

One may notice, too, that these critics concern themselves with the text's ethical injunction to the reader *tout court*—not specifically the critic. What then of an ethics of reading interested in what texts might tell critics about how they ought to proceed *as critics*? One center of gravity for any discussion of critical ethics is the work of Theodor Adorno. Within a substantial oeuvre, the conclusion of this article zeroes in on a short piece from *Minima Moralia* entitled "Morality and Style," which reads in part:

A writer will find that the more precisely, conscientiously, appropriately he expresses himself, the more obscure the literary result is thought, whereas a loose and irresponsible formulation is at once rewarded with certain understanding. . . . Rigour and purity in assembling words, however simple the result, create a vacuum. Shoddiness that drifts with the flow of familiar speech is taken as a sign of relevance and contact: people know what they want because they know what other people want. Regard for the object, rather than for communication, is suspect in any expression: anything specific, not taken from pre-existent patterns, appears inconsiderate, a symptom of eccentricity, almost of confusion.²⁷

Adorno's mood, his bitterness edging on an intemperateness that risks dismissing too much out of hand, is one key to understanding the stakes of critical work generally. For what matters here, as Adorno indicates with precision, is "regard for the object." More precisely still, this short essay confronts a defining dilemma of critical writing. What does it mean to write *about* a text? What levels of engagement are appropriate to the object? To what extent can the object of critical attention effectively shape the critic's writing about the object, and to what extent is writing blocked from access to the thing it writes "about"? Is it possible, given the noise of contemporary commodity culture (or, in a Gram-

scian register, the distorting pressures of ruling ideas), to activate a circuit of connection between writing and its object—indeed, for writing to *constitute* that circuit? Adorno's very use of the term "object" is one clue to an answer: What is at stake here is not some unmediated encounter with the thing itself, but rather a dialectical rendering of "the object" in writing. The dialectic here involves finding a language—a vocabulary and a style—appropriate to the object as it is *constructed* as an object of critical attention, and painstakingly (even lovingly) using that language to unfold that construction. As with the Gramscian inventory, here the exploration will always contain a negative dimension and a gap or insufficiency of the writing to the object.

The challenge Adorno expresses here, in articulating a writing appropriate to the object yet (and for that very reason) permanently insufficient to the object, establishes a double task: for the writer, and for the reader. As Adorno continues,

Vague expression permits the hearer to imagine whatever suits him and what he already thinks in any case. Rigorous formulation demands unequivocal comprehension, conceptual effort, to which people are deliberately discouraged, and imposes on them in advance of any content a suspension of all received opinions, and thus an isolation, that they violently resist.²⁸

What is here labeled "rigorous formulation" is a mode of particularized writing, singularly crafted in relation to the object. Again, this style of singular writing is itself what crafts the object: what, in the case of literary criticism, identifies, isolates, and specifies the text as an object of critical scrutiny. Adorno's demand, then—his ethics of reading—may be understood (though Adorno would not have seen it this way) as an elaboration of Gramsci's reading lesson at the level of critical style. For writing must now "impose" upon the reader "a suspension of all received opinions," must indeed "isolate" the reader: an isolation of the reader from "received opinion" that rhymes with the isolation of the object from its received understandings. There can be no immediate relationship to the object, perhaps; but in its place, Adorno strives toward a salutary mediation: writing as a capture of the object and the reader together, in style. The result is a break with one's contemporary life world that is at once (in its negative dimension) antagonistic to received opinion and (in its positive dimension) productive of an inventory of the self-conscious subject of history. Far from the ethical criticism with which this article began, Adorno's commitment is to the object alone: "Those who would escape . . . must recognize the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate."²⁹ Gone are the facile accounts of intersubjectivity; gone is the analogy between textual phenomena (characters, plots) and people. In their place, this radical ethics of reading insists upon an uncompromising return to the revolution of everyday life from an unexpected direction: the critical writing that elsewhere had been only the occasion for a turning away from the world as it is and as it might be.

Further Reading

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Notes:

(1.) Aristotle, *Poetics*, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2: 2316–2340.

(2.) See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2: 1748.

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- (3.) Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992), 315. Behind Lacan's argument lies Hegel's account of lordship and bondage (which is, importantly, a matter of self-consciousness for Hegel, which only finds its sequel in the later account of morality as such) and Nietzsche's speculative genealogy of morality. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–119 and 365–409; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil/On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), especially 217–245.
- (4.) Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1984), 39.
- (5.) Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York, NY: The New Press, 1997), 262.
- (6.) Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 263.
- (7.) Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), 324, 347.
- (8.) Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 324.
- (9.) Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 325.
- (10.) See Louis Althusser, "Marxism Is Not a Historicism," Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Estabiet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London, U.K.: Verso, 2016). Although Althusser formulates his argument in part as a critique of Gramsci, I follow Terry Eagleton and many others in finding that Gramsci had already arrived at Althusser's destination. See, among others, Eagleton, *Ideology* (London, U.K.: Verso, 1991), 93–123.
- (11.) Without diverting this essay into a study of psychoanalytic theory and practice, one notes the resonance with Lacan's formulation of psychoanalytic ethics. For Lacan, psychoanalysis is precisely the opposite of a therapy for accommodating the subject to its social world. It is for this reason that Lacan claims that "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire [*c'est d'avoir cédé sur son désir*]" and later that the desire of the analyst (the analyst's ethical position, if you like) must be "a desire to obtain absolute difference." In the first case, the point is to register the non-accommodation of the subject (the analysand) to the world; in the second case, the point is to convey that the analyst's function is to ensure that the analysand continues to talk in a way that is productive for the analysis; the analyst's desire is for the productive work of the analysis to continue, for the proliferation of more occasions of meaning making. The practical and political implications of these rather formalist injunctions are vast but beyond the scope of this article. See Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 319 (for the French, see Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VII: L'éthique de la psychoanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil, 1986], 368); and Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques*
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Lacan, *Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1998), 276. For one politically trenchant application of the ethics of psychoanalytic reading, see Antonio Viego, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), especially 75–107.

(12.) Cognitive-psychological and neuroscientific criticism has been concerned to produce new stories, based on speculations about the evolutionary function of culture and representation, and to draw into literary criticism conjectures on the cognitive causes for the pleasures of sympathetic identification or storytelling. For representative work in this mode, see Lisa Zunshine, ed., *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) and Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

(13.) G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 151.

(14.) Kenneth Womack, "Ethical Criticism," *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 602. For an important historicization of this approach to character-as-person, see Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

(15.) Fredric Jameson, "Criticism in History," *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 1: 124.

(16.) John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2014), 296. See also Frow's condensed account of character in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. Matthew Garrett (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 105–119. "Character system" is Alex Woloch's concept for the interlocking character spaces that constitute the socio-narrative world (Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003]). In a related vein, see M. M. Bakhtin's discussion of the "character zone" in "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 320.

(17.) See Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, Benjamin* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988). For an illustration of the critical deadlock this position produces, see the exchange between Booth and Richard M. Berrong over Rabelais's misogyny, which was preparatory to the publication of *The Company We Keep* (Wayne C. Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 9 [Fall 1982], 45–76; Richard M. Berrong, "Finding Antifeminism in Rabelais; Or, a Response to Wayne Booth's Call for an Ethical Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 [Summer 1985], 687–696; and Wayne C.

Booth, "Reply to Richard Berrong," *Critical Inquiry* 11 [Summer 1985], 697–701). For a thorough, authoritative, and sympathetic treatment of ethics and narrative, see James Phelan, "Narrative Ethics," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg, Germany: Hamburg University, 2009). For a recent synthesis and amplification of these positions in relation to postcolonial theory and in the context of an expanded archive of materials, see Lily Saint, *Black Cultural Life in South Africa: Reception, Apartheid, and Ethics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). A related preoccupation with alterity and with the absolute rupture of the "event" organizes the influential work of Emmanuel Levinas, which was itself an important influence on Derrida's ethical thought. In effect, Levinas's philosophy fuses the characterological and textual approaches into a single ethical program, focused as it is on the foundational encounter between a self and an always particular but always absolutely alien Other. For Levinas, the self is obliged to open itself (one might say, condescend) to the Other, to face the impossibility of killing that Other by accepting the Other as Other, rather than as victim of the self's violence. One notes the repetition, within Levinas's formidable philosophical output, of the potency and stark individuation of Aristotle's master-class morality, nowhere perhaps more so than in his commentary on Eros, in which love "aims at" the Other "in his frailty." The contrast with Lacanian ethics, for which loving is the subject's acceptance of its frailty (*its* lack), is definitive. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1979), 199, 256. For an example of the thematic application to the literary text, see James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington, "Ethics Before Politics: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 131–150.

(18.) Karl Marx, *Economic Works, 1857–1861 [Grundrisse]*, *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, 50 vols. (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1986), 28: 18.

(19.) Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 47. For a lapidary dismissal of the "ideal theory" of ethics, see also Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6–7.

(20.) Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII: The Sinthome*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2016), 77. For the French, see Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), 94.

(21.) Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 35.

(22.) Edelman, *No Future*, 109.

(23.) See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), especially 120–184.

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(24.) Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

(25.) Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 268.

(26.) Lacan himself formulated the sinthome through a more or less traditional thematic and biographical reading of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Stephen Dedalus is beaten by classmates yet seems to exhibit no concern (no disturbance in the register of the Imaginary) for his bodily peril. Lacan builds on this episode by observing that, with increasing intensity across his career, Joyce solved the problem of his ineffectual father (which in Lacan's account might otherwise have set the young Joyce on the path to psychosis) by identifying with his symptom, assimilating himself to language (the signifier) itself as "compensation for this paternal abdication" (Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 72).

(27.) Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, U.K.: Verso, 1978), 101.

(28.) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 101.

(29.) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 101.

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