

**Thomas Claviez 2008: *Aesthetics and Ethics: Otherness and Moral Imagination from Aristotle to Levinas and from Uncle Tom's Cabin to House Made of Dawn*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter. xxviii + 466 pp. ISBN 978-3-8253-5453-4**

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Wittgenstein's remark in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that "ethics and aesthetics are one and the same" (1922: 6421) testifies to the close link between the two disciplines that Thomas Claviez tackles in this book.<sup>1</sup> In particular, as Michael Eskin reminds us in the monographic issue of *Poetics Today* (2004: 588), the connections between ethics and literature go as far back as the origins of Western philosophy itself, with Plato's drawing on Homer in the *Republic* as a well-known example. Claviez chooses to take up the issue from Plato's pupil onwards, and pursues it up to contemporary times. The conceptual pair, however, has lived through various vicissitudes in their long history together. Only in the twentieth century has the ethics/ literature tandem moved through a relatively long period of stability and good understanding to one of deep estrangement, and back to a mutually enriching relationship. F.R. Leavis and his followers developed a particular brand of ethical criticism that aimed to distil the timeless moral truths of the Great Tradition of English literature (Arizti and Martínez-Falquina 2007: ix-x). The advent of Literary Theory in the second half of the century meant, however, the abandonment of ethics in favour of politics: "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" (Craps 2005: 6). It is in the late 1980s that literature scholars retake ethical criticism in what is generally known as the *turn to ethics*. At the same time as literature turns to ethics, moral philosophers such as Nussbaum, MacIntyre and Rorty turn to literature. They regard fiction as an ethics in the second degree (Eskin 2004: 587), capable of fleshing out ethical concerns. The renewed understanding between ethics and aesthetics is often attributed to the radicalism and excessive moral relativism brought about by some extreme forms of post-structuralist and postmodernist theory (Kotte 2001: 65). Paradoxically, some of the most active contributors to the ethical turn come from deconstructive quarters. Complementing – or, rather, contesting – the Neo-Aristotelian 'wing' of the return to ethics (Eagleton 2004: 595), these critics affirm that an ethics informed by the insights of deconstruction is not only possible but also desirable. The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, together with the thinking of Jacques Derrida, constitute the basis of a post-foundational ethics, distrustful of fixed universal moral values and concerned with typically post-structuralist issues such as undecidability and textuality.

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Claviez's book is a notable contribution to the field of ethics and aesthetics. The author moves with ease between the leading representatives of the two main trends within the ethical turn, spelling out their theories on alterity and analysing with rigour their different stances on the particular otherness of the fictional text. The scope of the book is not limited to the contemporary debate, but spreads back to the moral philosophy of Aristotle as well as the legacy of Immanuel Kant. The first two hundred and forty pages of dense theorising are counterbalanced by a similar number of pages devoted to the analysis of four classic texts of American letters, chosen for their common concern with ethics and their easily yielding ethical readings. Claviez's study is a must for scholars and advanced students of ethics, aesthetics and American studies, interested in exploring the synergies between ethics and literature. Unlike other contributions to ethical criticism that focus narrowly on the thought of one philosopher – see Falzon's *Foucault and the Social Dialogue* as an example – or deal monographically with the output of just one author, such as Craps' *Trauma and Ethics in the Novel's of Graham Swift*, Claviez gathers in his book the work of several philosophers together with the interpretation of four novels, managing to combine a wider scope with in-depth presentation and analysis. Claviez's interest in both the theory and the practice of ethical criticism makes of his *Aesthetics and Ethics* an interesting choice for the literary critic. Simon Critchley's excellent *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* and the collective volume *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics* (Campbell and Shapiro 1999), offer insights into some of the topics tackled by Claviez, such as the contributions of Kant and Levinas to the current debate on ethics, the connections between ethics and politics, or the intricacies of the encounter with the Other, but leave the critic to perform solo in his/her approach to narrative texts. Claviez both theorises and illustrates, guiding readers in their textual interpretations. In comparison with other books that also set the literary and the philosophical in dialogue, such as Kotte's *Ethical Dimensions in British Historiographic Metafiction*, or Larson's *Ethics and Narrative in the English Novel, 1880-1940*, Claviez's *Aesthetics and Ethics* avoids sketchy presentations and provides the reader with a thorough and highly elaborated exposition of the theories.

Part I, 'The Kantian Legacy of Deconstruction', analyses the role played by Kant in postmodern philosophy and ethics. Claviez starts by drawing attention to the paradoxical nature of this influence, since Kant's work appears as the paradigm of universality, the *bête noir* of postmodernism. Through the subtle deconstruction of Kant that follows, the reader is made aware of some contradictions in his theory: morality cannot be derived from examples, but, at the same time, examples are needed in order to put beyond doubt "the feasibility of what the law commands" (4, quoting Kant). Claviez pursues the tricky relationship between conceptual generalisations and examples in the following chapter, devoted to J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*, the first book, he affirms, to derive an ethical perspective from a deconstructive point of view (9). On pages 22-23, Claviez brings up for the first time Benjamin Constant's 'exemplary' story challenging Kant's moral principle, which forbids lying unconditionally: "a friend of mine, chased by a murderer, seeks shelter in my house. Having gone out, I meet the murderer who asks me where my friend is. Am I obliged to tell the truth?" According to Constant "no one has the right to a truth that harms others" (23). Different versions of this story, rewritten by Claviez – some

of them very funny – are used throughout the book to prove the dangers of magnifying the law. “What, then, is it that drops out of Kant’s system?” wonders Claviez. It is the other, as otherness does not exist before the law (28). The last chapter of this first section is dedicated to Lyotard’s concept of the sublime and its indebtedness to Kant. Again, Claviez finds fault in Lyotard’s theory, from which the figure of the other is virtually absent (39).

Part II is entitled ‘The Return of Aristotle: Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum’. Claviez acknowledges the common Aristotelian grounding of these two contemporary moral philosophers while highlighting their differences: MacIntyre considers liberalism the root of all contemporary evil and regards with nostalgia the social and moral coherence of the Aristotelian *polis* in comparison to the heterogeneity of modern society; Nussbaum, on the contrary, believes that an Aristotelian approach is perfectly able to accommodate the variety and polyphony that characterises liberalism (80). What MacIntyre does not take into account is the exclusions on which the *polis* was built. The pernicious effects of liberalism on the social are paralleled, according to him, to the decline of aesthetic representations of narrative unity in (post)modernist novels (75). Nussbaum re-elaborates Aristotelian moral philosophy and turns to literature as a means to ‘exemplify’ it (79). Two characteristics of the novel are especially relevant in helping literature transmit moral values: its emphasis on particularity and “the emotional aspect that allows the reader to feel and to identify with the protagonists” (93). The problem with both approaches, their differences notwithstanding, is that the line between the universal and the particular is rather unclear, and this has negative consequences for otherness: “the particular, if stripped of its otherness, threatens to be subsumed under (and dissolved in) what could paradoxically termed [sic] a ‘universal concept of particularity’” (111).

After his, so far, unsuccessful search for otherness, Claviez seems to have found two potent versions of it in Part III, ‘Approaching the Other: Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur’. Levinas is considered the most radical thinker of otherness and its connections with ethics. Ricoeur’s philosophy constitutes an ambitious attempt to reconcile three ethical systems in a dialectical way: Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Kant’s moral universalism and Levinas’s ethic of the encounter with the face of the other (114). In a striking paragraph that I reproduce at length, Claviez discloses what exactly has guided him in his philosophical quest:

What is necessary is a “moral theory” that does not force the same and the other, ethics and politics, morality and justice, the particular, the other, and the universal, activity and passivity, or responsibility and practical wisdom, into the Apollonian [*sic*] discourse of a dialectical ontology, as Ricoeur does, not to juggle around with these dichotomies in the Dionysian form of narrative comedy, as does Lyotard. A theory, moreover, that is able to stand the tension that results from the incompatibility between those dichotomies without trying to negotiate them in a “sentimental” manner that assumes a mutual permeability or even possible convergence of them, as does Nussbaum. If I argue, then, that the approaches of Levinas, Ricoeur and, to a certain extent, Nussbaum, will have to be used complementarily, this complementarity can never assume the status of a comprehensive, theoretical whole, or a “well-wrought, philosophical urn”, or a theoretical golden bowl. It might represent one more version of the “housing in of ethics with the aesthetic” that I alluded to in my introduction. (115-16)

This can also be read as an advance notice of Claviez's particular way of approaching the novels in Part IV, a way that profits from the insights of the theorists analysed in the first half of the book, without fully committing himself to any of them. The section he devotes to Levinas, entitled 'Oneself for the Other: Emmanuel Levinas', offers a very comprehensive and subtle account of his philosophy of alterity, as does the section 'Oneself as Another: Paul Ricoeur'. From the former, Claviez highlights the radicalism of his ethics of the face-to-face, which goes as far as to challenge not only individual freedom but also the Enlightenment notion of equality (117), both of them secondary to our infinite responsibility towards the other. There are also subsections on Levinas and the Feminine, his concept of The Third, his view of justice, history and time. Particularly illuminating is the longer section that tackles the interaction between ethics, politics and literature in Levinas. Claviez aptly deconstructs Levinas's contention that literature cannot represent the other, based on a highly reductive conception of the aesthetic that is almost exclusively concerned with its mythic aspects. Unlike Levinas, for whom "narratives cannot be ethical at all" (175), for Ricoeur no narrative is ethically neutral. His view of ethics is more comprehensive than Levinas's. For him, ethical intention aims at "the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" (176). Thus, the ethical quality of literature "depends on whether it can have any impact on life" (192). Ricoeur takes issue with the radicalism of Levinas's Other-centred ethics, which leads to self-effacement and is based on an idea of sacrifice that borders on self-hatred. "I cannot have self-esteem unless I esteem others *as myself*" (204; italics in the original). Levinas's asymmetrical encounter with the other is rejected in favour of a more balanced relationship of giving and receiving. Claviez also explores the connections Ricoeur makes between some narrative conventions, especially literary closure, and life, and their implications for an ethical reading of texts.

Claviez retakes the relationship between ethics and literature in the section that opens the last part of the book, Part IV, 'Toward an Ethics of Literature'. Here, he cautions about reading literary works simply as exemplifications of ethical theories. What he proposes to do in the following sections is to analyse how four American novels – *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Billy Budd*, *Sailor*, *Native Son* and *House Made of Dawn* – address the problems posed by the different ethics of alterity he has dealt with. His choice of novels is appropriate and has been made according to the following criteria: generic and historical breadth, ethical relevance and historical relevance (xxvi-xxviii). Claviez offers a fine analysis of Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic, drawing on Kant, Nussbaum, Levinas and Ricoeur, and reasserts the text's present importance, since it dramatizes moral dilemmas that are still acute (246). The novel is studied in its historical context and the contradictions of slave laws in the American South are exposed. The textual analysis reveals a shift towards a typological discourse in the novel (261) that turns the characters into allegories and sacrifices individuality, thus forcing Beecher Stowe to increase sentimentality in order to encourage reader identification. All in all, Claviez deems the novel's moral and political agenda effective. The section ends with a reference to Levinas: "the life-giving, but deep-freezing potential of a fictive Said that, at certain sublime moments, lets the Saying shine through" (283). In contrast to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the emphasis in *Billy Budd*, *Sailor* is on the "de-allegorization" (288) of its characters. The novel's uncertainty – it offers readers no clues as to which the 'right' reading is – makes it

a problematic work from an Aristotelian point of view (299). Claviez turns to Hannah Arendt in order to throw some light on the relationship between Billy Budd and Captain Vere. Arendt's belief that "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong" (308) positions her closer to Levinas than to Ricoeur. Claviez's reading could also have profited from Andrew Gibson's *ethics of sensibility or affect*, a theory based on Levinas, which can be simply summarised as "the power of being affected rather than affecting" (Gibson 1999: 161). In line with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Richard Wright's *Native Son* encourages controversy as to its moral implications and political stance (339). Is the novel a denunciation of the effects of white racism or does it contribute to perpetuating the stereotype of the monstrous black male? Nussbaum has herself interpreted the novel in the light of an Aristotelian virtue ethics: "The stigma of racial hatred ... emerges as fundamentally deforming of human personality and community, and the novel-reading stance calls out for political and social equality" (349). Claviez, however, finds her conclusion rather thin, and criticises Wright in the same move, on the grounds that it would have been easier to make his protagonist more humane and more accessible to readers (349). He proceeds to a close reading of the text focusing mainly on how Bigger, the male protagonist, evades his lawyer's attempt to erase his particularity by turning him into a symbol of a history of injustice (370). Claviez considers N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* the most difficult work to be approached within his theoretical frame. This is due to its acting as a bridge between two very different cultural systems – the Western and the Native American – as well as between three different worlds of tribal myth. Again, there exists the danger of going against particularity by reading the work as 'an example of'. Claviez also takes into consideration the generic and formal features of the novel: "its mixture of storytelling and novelistic characteristics, its embeddedness in mythic folklore and cosmology" (399). The most innovative aspect of the analysis is his incursion into the realm of environmental ethics and his application to animals of the Levinasian face-to-face. The concluding chapter of *Aesthetics and Ethics* refers back to the main theoretical issues tackled in the first part of the book and ends on a note on the future:

[Otherness] is a question that – in the face of recent tendencies towards globalization on the one hand, and hardening fronts ... between Western and non-Western cultures, on the other – may prove to be of central importance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And if we shouldn't expect literature to offer us any clear-cut answers, it might at least serve to make us aware of the question – and of the fact that there are no such easy, clear-cut answers. (450)

Claviez's book has some minor shortcomings. Throughout his study, he shows a natural flair for punning, witty bracketing and alliteration. "De Man's Demands" and "Re(w)ri(gh)ting Native Son [*sic*]", are just two examples in the Contents. Nevertheless, even earlier than this, the front cover provides an opportunity for a pun on words that plays on the similarities between *ethics* and *aesthetics*, which, despite the use of different colours, makes the title of the book unclear to the reader. Another flaw is that the book is marred by more than the average number of typographical errors, and also by quite a few grammatical mistakes. But perhaps my major objection to Claviez's study is the first few pages of the introduction. The book opens with the section 'American Studies Today', which takes up less than three pages, including five footnotes longer than the main text itself. Perhaps this is unnecessary. The reference to the present state of the field of American Studies could have been simply omitted, or otherwise included at the

beginning of Part IV, 'Toward and Ethics of Literature'. The first sentence of the book is somewhat inconsistent and controversial: "A shift has occurred within the field of American Studies – a 'turn toward the political'"(xv). If it concerns the political, then why write a book on the ethical and its connections with the aesthetic? Does this *turn* suggest that there are no major critical studies in the States in the last decades that approach literature from a political perspective? Claviez moves on to explain this turn to politics partly in terms of a reaction against "the bloodless abstractions and tiringly repetitive readings of deconstruction and poststructuralism" (xv). That poststructuralism and deconstruction can have political edge has now been sufficiently proved. Besides, it is the 'ethical turn' that has often been attributed to the excesses of these two theories. And it is indeed the turn to *ethics* that Claviez analyses in the rest of the book. All this seems to bring about some terminological imprecision that might encourage confusion between ethical and political criticism.

Despite the above reservations, Claviez has produced an excellent book, impressive in its scope and a perfect blend of theory and analysis. His mastery at unravelling dense theories is patent throughout. He guides the reader smoothly through the intricacies of ethics and aesthetics, from Aristotle to Paul Ricoeur. The most refreshing aspect of the book is Claviez's wit, a rarity in academic writing.

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