

Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, eds. 2007: *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Xxiii + 424pp. ISBN 1-84718-358-1

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The publication of *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English* (2007), a collective volume edited by Barbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, responds, as the editors point out in their Introduction, to “the so-called ‘turn to ethics’ that has characterized the humanities in general and literary studies in particular since the late 1980s” (x).¹ It may be, then, seen as successor or companion to other edited books – such as *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism* (1996), edited by Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung, *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (1998), edited by Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker, or *The Turn to Ethics* (2000), edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz – and to special journal issues such as *Philosophia* 35.2 (2007), *PMLA* 114.1 (1999) and *Poetics Today* 25.4 (2004). To these we have to add an ever-growing list of books of ethical literary criticism, with crucial contributions such as J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), David Parker’s *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (1994), Adam Zachary Newton’s *Narrative Ethics* (1995), Andrew Gibson’s *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* (1999), and Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). The considerable number of publications focused on the relation between literature and ethics certainly suggests that this constitutes one of the most important theoretical ‘turns’ to have occurred in the field of literary studies in the last two decades, so that a contribution such as the one under review here is more than welcome.

The inquiry into the relation between the ethical and the literary is by no means a recent concern. As put by Michael Eskin, “the specific site and force of the ethical in the literary have been the subject of considerable debate among poets, critics, and philosophers, beginning with Plato’s and Aristotle’s pioneering meditations on these issues” (2004b: 576). Thus, we should ask what are the specific traits and agents of the current engagement between literature and ethics, a question approached by the editors of *On the Turn* in their Introduction, in which they provide a succinct overview of the contemporary ethical turn, situating it within the following diachronic schema of twentieth century Anglo-Saxon literary criticism. The Leavisian, liberal-humanist critical tradition, beginning in the 30’s and fundamentally concerned with “timeless moral truths”, was followed by the boom of Literary Theory in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s, when (post)structuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction reacted against “the

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universalising tendency of Leavis's moral criticism". And in turn, the "renewed interest in ethics has been partly motivated by the excessive radicalism and relativism dictated by some forms of Theory" (x). This three-stage schema is accurate in its identification of the main currents and counter-currents, but also contains one important contradiction to which the editors implicitly point as they identify "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" (xi). The *turn* to ethics, then, is not so much a complete reversal of direction as a movement of partial rotation in which different points of departure keep being looked back at. More particularly, if the turn to ethics may be seen as a reaction to what has been called Theory, it is also fundamentally indebted to it, as we see in the essential contribution of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, to which the editors rightly point.

It is especially the work of Levinas, with his ethical philosophy of responsibility toward the Other, that has marked a crucial trend within the movement of ethical literary criticism. However, Levinas's influence cannot be seen as separate from Derrida's. As Lawrence Bell has argued, "if Levinas should become the most central theorist for the poststructuralist dispensation of turn-of-the-century literary-ethical inquiry, ... a good deal of the credit must go to Derrida for having called the attention of literary scholars to Levinas's work" (1999: 9). Hence, the pivotal contribution of Levinas's works, especially *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (1974), must be seen in conjunction with Derrida's response to Levinas in works such as *The Gift of Death* (1992) and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1997).

Together with this deconstructive and post-Levinasian wing, Arizti and Martínez-Falquina, following Robert Eaglestone (2004: 602), identify another trend within the current ethical panorama, one characterized by a neo-Aristotelian stance and a "regeneration of the values of liberal humanism, still suffering from the wounds inflicted by Literary Theory" (xii), and in which they include names such as Wayne Booth, David Parker, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty. The work of Nussbaum, MacIntyre and Rorty, who approach literature as a field inextricably related to philosophical moral inquiry, attests Eskin's assertion that "a 'turn to ethics' in literary studies' has gone together with "a 'turn to literature' in (moral) philosophy" (2004a: 557).

This myriad of names and influences highlights one central feature of the so-called turn to ethics, namely, its heterogeneous, multifaceted, even malleable, nature. Thus, Lawrence Bell has described the ethical turn as "a groundswell of still uncertain magnitude and even more uncertain focus" (2000: 1), and has defined *ethics* as a "privileged signifier", "increasingly ductile" and "potentially confusing" (1999: 11). The editors of *On the Turn*, on the contrary, choose to underline the positive aspects of the miscellaneous and, to a large extent, contradictory nature of the ethical turn, arguing that "the advantages of the 'crossover' among disciplines, interests, discourses and practices, brought about by the phenomenon, amply make up for the putative loss of critical edge" (xiv).

Their volume certainly responds to this 'crossover' as its twenty-two essays – distributed into five parts, 'Framing Ethics', 'Studies in Mode', 'Visions of Multiplicity',

'Political Positionings' and 'The Ethics of Writing/Reading' – are considerably different in its approach and perspective. Part I, containing three essays, begins with an essay by Andrew Gibson, an important contributor to the ethical turn in its deconstructive wing, especially through his book *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*. In this book, Gibson makes the valuable suggestion that literary criticism may be best thought of not as operating according to a political temporality – one of “direct relevance and immediate efficacy” – but according to an ethical one, “in relation to an undecidable future, or a utopian hope which cannot know exactly what it might anticipate” (1999: 4). In his essay, Gibson makes an intriguing reading of J.M. Coetzee’s work, focusing on the way in which “certain modes of narrative or narrative instances [are] indeed concerned with the radical singularity or incalculable hazard of the event, the event as instantaneous surprise” (3). In his concern with the event, Gibson is indebted to the French philosopher Alain Badiou, whose *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (1993) should be brought into the ethical discussion, though he is just mentioned in passing by some of the contributors to this volume, probably because Badiou’s ethical proposal actually constitutes a ferocious attack of an ethics based upon the category of the other. As he contends in his *Ethics*, “the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question ... is much more that of recognizing the Same” (2001: 25). Badiou’s proposal of a universal ethics of truth can make us alert to the potential dangers of the current “orthodox ... generalized reverence for the other qua other” (Hallward 2001: xxii).

Gibson’s essay is followed by Patricia Waugh’s interdisciplinary discussion of the relation between the scientific claims of the biological sciences, literature and ethics, where she suggests, through the reading of Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*, that the recent scientific recognition of the important role played by emotion and the body in our ethical judgements had somehow been anticipated by the tradition of the novel, which is, hence, presented as a privileged arena of ethical enquiry. The section finishes with Heinz Antor’s refutation of the commonplace view of the postmodern paradigm as one dominated by a post-humanist stance of ‘anything goes’, arguing, instead, for an “ethics of a post-modern critical neo-humanism”, such as the one we find in McEwan’s *Black Dogs*, with its “critical discussion of the fundamental ethical questions of self-positioning and orientation in a contingent, pluralist and fragmented environment” (49).

The four essays included in Part II pay attention to the ethical dimension as related to narrative features, textual aspects or discursive modes. Susana Onega carries out a thorough analysis of “the ethics of narrative form in A.S. Byatt’s *Babel Tower*”, relating Byatt’s parodic use of realist formal narrative conventions to her depiction of provisional values open to negotiation and ambivalent attitude toward patriarchal humanism. Similarly, Jean-Michel Ganteau’s interest is not in an ethics “dependent on the represented content (thematized ethics), but in what Andrew Gibson calls ‘discursive ethics’” (79). Thus, he analyzes the ethical nature of romance, as illustrative of three categories of Levinasian ethics: *excendance*, *vulnerability* and *the Saying*. María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro’s concern is with the relation between satire and deconstruction in Charles Palliser’s ‘The Medicine Man’: satire may become, through deconstruction, a most ethical mode, as “the deconstructive enterprise does not make ethics inoperative; it rather posits that in ethics ... the traditional fixed points of reference should become

the objects of scrutiny rather than the guideposts to further ethical decisions” (102). Finally, Gabrielle Moyer examines rhetorical accounts of falling in and out of love, as she intends “to recuperate into positive ethical account the formal difficulty of Eliot’s poetry, a kind of difficulty common to modernist fictions” (108).

In Part III, made up of five essays, contributors approach the relation between ethics and literature from a rather colonial and postcolonial perspective, paying attention to questions of ethnicity, territoriality and religion. Drawing upon Zachary Newton’s *Narrative Ethics* and Booth’s *The Company We Keep*, Gordon Henry reflects upon an ethical mode of writing about American Indians, whereas M. Dolores Herreros examines the intersections between ethics, territoriality and language in David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*, taking as point of departure the opposition between Levinasian nomadic ethics of place and Heideggerian enrooted forms of dwelling. Isabel Fraile Murlanch also turns to Levinas, specifically to this concept of *Facing*, in order to explore the ways in which gaze, responsibility and identity interact in Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Last Magician* and *Oyster*. Chris Weedon, on the other hand, is concerned with the relation between the politics of visual representation, the socio-political contexts of reading and viewing, and the images of Islam produced in Britain within a climate of Islamophobia, focusing his argument on the film version of Hanif Kureishi’s *My Son the Fanatic*. Rüdiger Ahrens’s essay deals with “equity as ethical principle in (post-)colonial literatures”, analyzing the connections between law and equity, on the one hand, and between dominant and marginal discourses, colonial and postcolonial stories, or included and excluded voices, on the other.

Part IV includes four essays exploring the relations between ethics and political positionings, and opens with Stephen Ingle’s defence of the contemporary relevance of the Orwellian concept of objective truth: in the present political climate of governmental lies and state control, the problem of knowing the truth, as related to questions of power and language, continues to be a central ethical concern. Chantal Cornut-Gentille D’Arcy analyzes the BBC series of the 90’s *The Vicar of Dibley* as a site in which numerous ethical issues are raised, specifically important questions related to religion and gender. Drawing on James Phelan’s analysis of the communicative situation of narrative as a rhetorical and ethical act, and on Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘schizoanalytic’ reconceptualization of repression, Mónica Calvo Pascual analyzes Stephen Marlowe’s *Colossus*, particularly the way in which the protagonist is presented as a psychotic subject in the surrounding neurotic and fascist Spanish society. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez acutely analyzes the multiple references to visual perception that we find in E.L. Doctorow’s *The March*, and that seem to point to a pre-verbal ethical realm recalling the Levinasian understanding of ethics as a precultural stage of recognition.

The final part of the book is concerned with the ethics of writing and reading, so that the focus of its six essays tends to be on the dynamic and complex relations established between author, narrator, reader and text. Thus, following Miller’s ethics of reading, Marita Nadal makes an interesting analysis of Flannery O’Connor’s tales, in which she detects an ethical law hidden in the text but also revealed through it, and related to a resistant unreadability, by virtue of which the literary text cannot be reduced to the reader’s terms. Vera Nünning examines the ethical implications of unreliable narration in McEwan’s *Enduring Love* and Nick Hornby’s *A Long Way Down*. In these two novels,

strange and seemingly unreliable narrators evoke an experience of alterity, but as unreliability diminishes and the distance between narrator and reader is reduced, sympathy toward the other is affirmed, as well as a common ground between self and other, with the subsequent ethical implications. C. Namwali Serpell provides an elaborate critique of certain ethical models of reading, in particular that which relies on mimesis or verisimilitude, as if there was an analogy between our ethical lives and literary characters' ethical acts, and the one that underlines literature's indeterminacies, so that ambiguity is left as the only possible ethical value. To counteract these two problems, Serpell suggests an "analogy not between characters and people but between how we read literature and how we interact with other people" (344), and offers an illuminating reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, according to which, though a palimpsestic technique of multiplicity and narrative uncertainty, Morrison develops an ethics of the adjoining, so that the reader is ethically compelled to enter the text. From an original perspective, Adia Mendelson-Maoz approaches literature both as a medium of moral investigation and as an aesthetic object, focusing on Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and on three major rhetorical elements – multiple narratives, dissonance and a fatal act – as presenting moral dilemmas. Finally, Sonia Baelo-Allué reviews the reception of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* in order to make the point that the ethical approach cannot operate independently of the analysis of aesthetic choices, whereas Eamonn Dunne, following Miller's arguments about the ethical dimension implied in all acts of reading, analyzes Paul Auster's *City of Glass* as an allegory of readers' inventive responsibility in relation to the undecidable and inexhaustible meaning of the literary text.

All in all, *On the Turn* provides a heterogeneous vision of the myriad perspectives from which the ethical turn may be approached and the miscellaneous ways in which it may be brought into literary analysis, thus underlining the enormous critical potential of the ethical reading of literature. In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum yearned for a literary theory working in conversation with ethical theory, with both disciplines contributing to the enterprise of how "we might possibly live together" (1990: 190): the essays collected in this volume certainly attest to the partnership between these two disciplines. After all, the perception of literature as the site in which ethical conflicts come to be played is an old one. As Eskin has it, "what we have come to call literature has been credited, in the Western cultural context at least, with an ethical force ostensibly exceeding that of moral philosophy. Literature has been held to be capable of *doing* ... certain things ethical that moral philosophy would fall short of" (2004b: 573-74). The question concerning us is, then, both ancient and urgent, and demands, as the best essays in this volume suggest, a rigorous examination of the theoretical tools at hand, and a close engagement with the formal singularity and verbal particularity of literary discourse, since it is those qualities that turn literature into literature; it is through those qualities that literary works *do things* that other discourses will never do.

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