Introduction:
The Double "Turn" to
Ethics and Literature?

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The contemporary revival, in parts of the humanities, of a strong interest in the question of "ethics and literature" has recently celebrated its twentieth birthday. Two decades after "ethics and literature" went public—with *New Literary History*'s pioneering special issue "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy" (1983)—we can look back on what has unquestionably consolidated into a burgeoning subdiscipline, an academic venture yielding ever-increasing intellectual dividends on the shares initially supplied by Martha Nussbaum's "Flawed Crystals" (1983), J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep* (1988), and Tobin Siebers's *The Ethics of Criticism* (1988), among others.[1] Such authors as Richard Rorty (1989), Simon Critchley (1992), Samuel Goldberg (1993), Dawne McCance (1996), Robert Eaglestone (1997), Colin McGinn (1997), Jill Robbins (1999), William Waters (2003), and Derek Attridge (2004)—to name only a few—have all bought, in one way or another, into the erstwhile start-up company. Their combined efforts have signaled what has come to be perceived and referred to as a "turn to ethics" in literary studies and, conversely, a "turn to literature" in (moral) philosophy.[2]

1. Of course, 1983 is a date of convenience—albeit a plausible one. Iris Murdoch, for instance, had been exploring the relationship between literature and moral philosophy long before it became one of the foci of contemporary thought. I use *literature* in a broad sense, including film, etc.

2. On the application of the notion of "turn" in the present context, see, for instance, Hoff-

Certainly, this double turn can be seen as a function of intra- as well as interdisciplinary developments. One may read the turn to ethics in literary studies as a "reaction against the [putative] formalism . . . of deconstruction" (Phelan 2001: 107) and the growing influence of such thinkers as Emmanuel Levinas—especially in the wake of the "de Man controversy" in the late 1980s—and relate it to broader institutional developments, such as the "continuing power of feminist criticism and theory and the rising influence of African American, [postcolonial,] multicultural, and queer criticism and theory, all of which ground themselves in sets of ethico-political commitments" (ibid.).[3] Concomitantly, the literary turn in contemporary, especially Anglo-American, philosophy—most pointedly articulated in Rorty's (1999 [1989]: xvi) "general turn against theory and toward narrative"—can be viewed as a homologous response to the putative formalism of analytical moral theory in favor of a more Aristotelian—eudaimonistic and aretaic—approach to human existence as it is played out by singular persons in specific situations, which are, so the claim goes, best illuminated in and through works of literature.[4]

The presumed explanatory force and perceived causal immediacy of certain historical conditions notwithstanding, however, 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." This is not by any means to derogate from or diminish the achievements of ethical critics over the past couple of decades, nor is it to postulate a squarely continuous view of history, thereby playing into the hands of conservatism. It is simply to forestall a falsely progressivist assessment of the current state of affairs in the "ethics and literature" debate based on a facile notion of innovation by being mindful,

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man and Hornung 1996 ("moral turn"); Rorty 1999 [1989]: xvi ("turn . . . toward narrative"); Antonaccio 2000: 18 ("turn to literature"); Garber et al. 2000 ("turn to ethics"); Davis and Womack 2001 ("ethical turn"); Wyschogrod and McKenny 2003: 1–2 ("turn to the subject [of ethics]). For further treatment of the connection between literature and ethics, see also MacIntyre 1984 [1981]; Elridge 1989; Nussbaum 1990; Waters 1996, 2003; Madison and Fairbairn 1999; Attridge 1994, 1999; Buell 1999; Kearney 1999; Eskin 2000; Miller 1989, 2001; Schüller 2001. I should note, in passing, that the disciplines of law, political science, and medicine, too, have been marked by an increasing awareness of the necessity to incorporate the study of narrative and literature into their curricula (see esp. Weisberg 1992; Nussbaum 1995; and the recently founded journal *Narrative Medicine*).

3. See also Rey Chow's contribution to this special issue.

4. For a brief history and overview of contemporary analytical moral theory, see Donagan 1992; MacIntyre 1984 [1981]: 6–35. On the revival of Aristotelianism in contemporary Anglo-American and continental ethics, see Murdoch 2001 [1971]; MacIntyre 1984 [1981]; Nussbaum 1990; Derrida 1994.

twenty years and a slew of publications on the subject later, of such facts as that philosophy—of which ethics is a branch, of course—and (the study of) literature have been more or less overtly enmeshed since, at the very least, Plato's reflections on the subject;[5] that the problem of "ethics and literature" has been explicitly addressed, in the twentieth century, for one, on more than one occasion, as when, long before the rise of contemporary ethical criticism, Kurt Pinthus (1920: xii) diagnosed a "momentous turn toward the ethical [große Hinwendung zum Ethischen]" in the works of those responding to the upheavals of World War I and its aftermath;[6] and finally, that the indelible, if complex and at times covert, interface of the ethical and the literary has been "uncovered" even in the allegedly most "unethical" critical-philosophical ventures of the twentieth century, such as structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction.[7]

Significantly, it was none other than Derrida—the epitome of deconstruction's putatively "unethical" impetus—who had been engaged with the question of "ethics and literature" long before its public outing in the 1980s.[8] Even the validity of such cautious attempts as Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack's (2001: x) at locating the innovative thrust of the contemporary version of the "ethical turn" in the disavowal of "the simplistic, uncomplicated prescription of external ethical forces regarding . . . different literatures and cultures"—presumably characteristic of earlier "twentieth-century . . . discussion[s] of ethics and literature"—will have been historically foreclosed by, for instance, the following reflections in I. A. Richards's (1929: 350–51) *Practical Criticism*:

> If we are neither to swim blindly in schools under the suggestion of fashion, nor
> to shudder into paralysis before the inconceivable complexity of experience, we

5. See also my own contribution to this special issue. For analytical philosophers' concern with the literary in particular, see, for instance, Frege 1892: 32, 1967: 347; Russell 1919: 168, 1956: 46, 54; Austin 1975 [1962]: 12; Searle 1975; Kripke 1972: 157–58.
6. The work of Pinthus's contemporaries I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis also has been depicted as marking an "ethical turn of criticism" (Eaglestone 1997: 18). See also Ulrich Kinzel's contribution to this special issue.
7. See esp. Barthes 1964: 254–55; Attridge 1987: 18–22, 1995; Miller 1987; Critchley 1999 [1992]. See also Robert Eaglestone's and Rey Chow's contributions to this special issue.
8. See esp. Derrida 1967 as well as Derrida 1985 [1982], 1995 [1992]. I should note that reader-response criticism and *Rezeptionsästhetik* also would fall within the purview of ethical criticism at large, to the extent that the latter concerns itself with responsibility to the other as a function of my singular response to a person, situation, text, etc. Heidegger's (1959: 98–99) caveat regarding an all too simple notion of "turning" in intellectual history is apposite in the present context: every apparently novel critical preoccupation or position, he notes with tacit regard to his own perceived "Kehre," is "merely a stopover along a continuous way. What abides in [the history] of thinking is the way. Ways of thinking contain the mystery that we may travel backward and forward on them and that the way back may actually be the condition for going forward" (my translation).

must find means of exercising our power of choice. The critical reading of poetry is an arduous discipline; few exercises reveal to us more clearly the limitations under which, from moment to moment, we suffer. . . . The lesson of all criticism is that we have *nothing to rely upon in making our choices but ourselves*. The lesson of good poetry seems to be that, when we have understood it, in the degree in which we can order ourselves, we need nothing more.   (My emphasis)

Far from buying into a "simplistic, uncomplicated prescription of external ethical forces" and advocating a "prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading" (Davis and Womack 2001: x), Richards articulates avant la lettre one of the central tenets of current ethical criticism of all colors, namely, that it is the singular encounter between reader and text-as-other, soliciting a singularly just response on the reader's part that is at stake in "ethics and literature."

Does this mean that, at the end of the day, contemporary ethical criticism is reduced, as has been suggested, to "describ[ing] and giv[ing] shape to what has always existed" (ibid.: ix) and, consequently, to rehashing and reheating leftovers? I tend to answer in the negative, to the extent that such a view implies a fixed subject of "ethics and literature." While it is certainly the case that "ethics and literature" must be supported by the skeleton of a minimum of abiding, fundamental concerns that make it what it is—such as the overall question of literature and its significance for the moral potential of the human being in a given community—it is not the case that, to spin out the metaphor, its organs, muscles, sinews, and sundry other life-sustaining trappings have not evolved or changed, if minimally, over time. Furthermore, if it is true—as many a philosopher, scientist, and linguist (including myself) has believed since Humboldt and Herder—that language does co-constitute reality, then it must be the case that ethical critics' changing descriptions and reshapings of "what has always existed" also, necessarily, change the subject(s) of their descriptions and reshapings.

Thus, although speaking of a "turn" in the present context may be infelicitous, insofar as it can be contested on the very historical grounds that ostensibly gave rise to it, it does not automatically imply that "ethics and literature" today has nothing new or insightful to offer in theoretical or practical terms. It merely implies that any claim to novelty on the part of contemporary ethical criticism ought perforce to be sited in the interplay of, at the very least, the following two factors: the rearticulation and recontextualization of an established epistemological-hermeneutic framework together with a set of abiding ethical-cum-literary concerns (see below) *and* the displacement and refashioning—however modest—of that framework in light of and in response to the essentially unprecedented and unique cultural and sociohistorical conditions and demands of the present. In other words, if

this most recent resurgence of critical-philosophical interest in "ethics and literature" is to be credited with innovative force and significance, these latter must perforce be of an iterable kind, consisting in revisiting, displacing, and (re)inscribing extant reflections on the ethical significance of literature and the interface between the two discursive genres in a language and key attuned to the philosophical, theoretical, cultural, and sociopolitical developments and challenges of the present and recent past.[9] Questions tackled by authors from Plato and Aristotle through Ficino, Kant, and Nietzsche to Sartre, Adorno, and Levinas—such as that of the good life in a particular community; of self-improvement and moral perfection; of duty and responsibility to the other and to myself; of just and upright speech and action; of truth and lying; of the moral significance of the arts; of the relationship between speech, ethos, and value; of the very meaning of "literature"—continue to resound in the symphony of contemporary buzzwords and topoi, occasionally vague and slippery, such as *alterity*, *interpellation*, *call of the other*, *answerability*, *ethical responsibility*, *openness*, *obligation*, *event*, *doing justice*, *witnessing*, *hospitality*, *singularity*, *particularity*, or the *gift*.

Levinas's and Derrida's rewritings of Genesis 22, in response to Kant's and Kierkegaard's (as well as, in Derrida's case, Levinas's) interpretations of the biblical text, are an illuminating case in point. All four authors read the story allegorically, i.e., as literature. According to Kant (1979 [1798]: 114–15), who construes Abraham's relation to God in analogy with the subject's relation to the absolute monarch, the enlightened patriarch's duty should have been not to heed God's command to kill Isaac (Gen. 22:2) due to a lack of certainty about God's existence and, consequently, authority. According to Kierkegaard (1988 [1843]), who reads the episode against the backdrop of Hegelianism and its political ramifications in post-Napoleonic restoration Europe, Abraham, in going along with God's command to sacrifice his son, is the ultimate exemplar of faith, teleologically suspending the general ethical realm, within which the son's murder would be considered an act of unheard-of atrociousness, in the name of the singular, irrational, and absurd—in the name, that is, of an unwavering faith in Isaac's salvation against all odds. According to Levinas (1976: 88–92), who reads the story emphatically in light of and in response to the Holocaust (and the Israeli-Arab conflict), Abraham and Isaac enact the ultimate ethical situation in which the other's murder by me is made impossible in the name of the absolute other (God); it is precisely Abraham's hospitality, his openness to the call of the other that allows him to hear God's second command *not to kill his son* (Gen. 22:12), overriding the first. In other words, Levinas locates the

9. "'Iterability,'" Derrida (1988: 119) notes, "does not signify . . . repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this same . . . in the singularity of the event."

significance of the story in the prohibition of murder. Derrida (1995 [1992]: 53–84, esp. 70), finally, revises previous readings of the biblical episode in light of what he perceives to be the ethical-political impossibility of doing justice to and being responsible to and for the other without at the same time *not* doing justice and being responsible to and for another other and, by extension, (all) other others—a problem particularly pressing in a global-ized world, in which "all others" are constantly beamed into my very presence by dint of the media. Clearly, from the perspective of iterability, the novelty of Levinas's and Derrida's readings consists in—as banal and self-evident as this may appear—attending to and highlighting aspects in the biblical text occluded or glossed over in previous readings. In so doing—in reshaping "what has always existed"—they do in fact create (as did Kant and Kierkegaard in their own times) new texts with unprecedented impe-tuses geared toward a particular present.

So, where does all this leave us regarding the overall import of the puta-tive double turn to ethics and literature in literary studies and philosophy, respectively? Given the state of affairs outlined above, I suggest tabling, for the moment, the very notion of "turn," which bespeaks the critic's attempt at self-empowerment by dint of sensational and funky catchwords rather than a sober and balanced evaluation of matters at hand. Neither ethics nor literature could possibly be "back in literary studies [and] philosophy" (Garber et al. 2000: viii), respectively—if only, as several of the essays in this special issue rightly argue, because they never left. If we want seriously to assess the significance of what has been going on in parts of the humanities in the last two decades, we must abstain from romanticizing and sensation-alizing the developments mentioned—even at the risk of winding up with the fairly boring, provisional insight that we are dealing here, as I men-tioned earlier, with a *revival* and a *resurgence*.

I have just said "provisional," for it may very well be that more is at stake than innovation qua iterability in contemporary ethical criticism; that, behind the screen of critical preoccupation with "ethics and litera-ture," actually neither ethics nor literature as discrete yet related domains or (metaphysical-ontological) entities are at stake—and, hence, not a "turn" to either—but, rather, the possibility and practice, as some of the essays in this special issue suggest, of a new kind of "aesthetics": an "aesthet-ics"—provisionally called *ethical criticism* for lack of a better term—not grounded in the senses and not predicated on accepted notions of percep-tion (aisthesis), form, and beauty/sublimity; an "aesthetics" informed by a newly forged conceptual inventory and vocabulary made up precisely of the above-mentioned buzzwords, which, while vague and perhaps unsat-isfactory from a traditional logical-philosophical viewpoint, reveal their

full force within the yet-to-be-defined parameters of this budding new discourse; an "aesthetics" according to which ethics (and philosophy in general) and literature only exist and make sense in conjunction, as ethics-and-literature; an "aesthetics" that conceives of art and our engagement with it not in standard aesthetic but in what has been called "poethic" terms, whereby the ethical and the literary are transformed and sublated into a qualitatively altogether novel union based on hitherto unprecedented molecular blueprints, as it were.[10] And maybe it is precisely the freshness and novelty of this combined thrust in the direction of a new "aesthetics" on the part of philosophers and of literary and cultural critics—irrespective of its success or failure—that the overused and historically problematic moniker *turn* ultimately points to by way of an experiential shorthand?

In order even to begin seriously responding to this signal question, we first need to assess and probe the scope, achievements, and potential of contemporary ethical criticism. In an attempt to attend to these manifold tasks, this special issue on ethics and literature has gathered contributions by well-established ethical critics (e.g., Nussbaum, Attridge) and relative "newcomers" to ethics-and-literature alike (e.g., Eaglestone, Waters), covering both contemporary ethical criticism's historical trajectory and core disciplinary spectrum. The mixture of contributions by philosophers and literary and cultural critics offers a nuanced, multifaceted, and balanced—if inevitably fragmented—picture of the current state of the theory and practice of "ethics and literature" and provides a forum for cross-disciplinary critique with a view to unmasking those aspects of this latest academic trend that do not withstand serious scrutiny while valorizing what contemporary ethical criticism may indeed have to offer in terms of shaping our lives as constant readers and interpreters.

The essays constituting the first section—"Charting Ethics and Literature"—deal with the very notions and tasks of ethics, aesthetics, and literature, arguing for the necessity to approach these domains in an integral mode, that is, precisely as ethics-and-literature.

My own "On Literature and Ethics" begins from a critique of the common view that literature is somehow ethically more effective than moral philosophy. After disclosing the central theoretical impasse in dominant

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10. The term *poethic*—signifying the fusion of the ethical and the literary—has been used, for instance, by Richard Weisberg (1992), Gerald Bruns (1994), Joan Retallack (1994, 2003), and myself (Eskin 1997: 247, 2000). Roland Barthes's (1973: 94) imagined new "esthéthique (si le mot n'est pas trop déprécié) fondée jusqu'au bout (complètement, radicalement, dans tous les sens) *sur le plaisir du consommateur*" presents an apposite precedent for the contemporary striving toward a new (and quite un-Barthian) "aesthetic."

accounts of the ethical significance of literature, namely, their tacit reliance on the logically-linguistically untenable Aristotelian apophansis/nonapophansis or nonfiction/fiction distinction, I suggest an alternative framework for explaining the entwinement of literature and ethics based on Bakhtin's and MacIntyre's distinction between context-dependent and context-independent speech genres as well as on Peirce's and Benveniste's semiotics. The relation between literature and ethics, I suggest, ought to be conceived of in terms of mutual translatability. On this view, literature's ethically exemplary force would consist in what I call its discursive capaciousness—the fact that it is capable of translating ethics into a "more developed" text. My essay's main impetus boils down to an attempt to displace the common distinction between moral philosophy and literature on logical-referential grounds in favor of an integral conception according to which both are to be located along one discursive-semiotic continuum, needing and "meaning" each other without becoming identical or equivalent.

A similar concern with the difference-in-unity of literature and ethics is at the heart of Robert Eaglestone's "One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth." Taking Wittgenstein's claim (1990 [1921]: 86 [6.421]) that "ethics and aesthetics are one and the same" as his thematic cue, Eaglestone focuses on what he perceives to be a failure on the part of contemporary accounts of the relationship between these domains to think through their mutual imbrication, a failure that results from approaching the two as originarily split. The tacit assumption of an originary split between ethics and literature in turn entails the more or less overt reliance on a positivist notion of truth predicated on pragmatic, moral knowledge that would integrate the two discourses: either positively, in terms of (a) truth about the conduct of life to be had or attained by way of literature, or negatively, in terms of literature's failure to offer knowledge or truth about the conduct of life. What these accounts completely miss, Eaglestone argues, is art's "world revealing" force, its mode of being as *aletheia*, which belies the stipulated split. For Eaglestone, Wittgenstein's remark and the notion of truth as *aletheia* (pace Wittgenstein's squarely anti-ontological bent) that it implies—a notion most explicitly elaborated by Heidegger and recently taken up again by the New Aestheticists—come much closer to what art effectively accomplishes. Ethical criticism ought to be conceived of and practiced, according to Eaglestone, under the sign and as a function of its relation to and suffusion with truth; its success or failure will then depend on adequately thinking through "what it might mean to say that 'ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.'"

Kathrin Stengel's contribution "Ethics as Style: Wittgenstein's Aesthetic

Ethics and Ethical Aesthetics" in effect responds to Eaglestone's challenge concerning Wittgenstein's dictum. Rather than approaching it in light of an ontological notion of truth presumably implied in, yet factually extraneous to, Wittgenstein's text, Stengel interprets the dictum from within the logical-linguistic framework of the philosopher's thought. On Stengel's reading, ethics and aesthetics are one, according to Wittgenstein, not in the sense of being subtended by a communal ground (such as truth) but insofar as they exceed propositionality and hence do not pertain to truth (or falsehood) at all. Wittgenstein's rapprochement of ethics and aesthetics on the basis of their specific relation to propositional language implies that it is through the prism of language in particular that its own transgression must be witnessable. What in propositional language testifies to its own transgression? It is style, Stengel argues, with Wittgenstein in mind. A person's style—conceived of in terms exceeding the rhetorical—bespeaks the ethical and aesthetic transgression of propositional language. Style reveals a person's view of life and the world and gives expression to value; in style, the ethical transpires aesthetically, and, conversely, the aesthetic is imbued with the ethical; in style, Wittgenstein (1990 [1921]: 88 [6.522]) notes, the other side of propositional language simply "*shows* itself [*zeigt* sich]." Stengel's most important move consists in rereading Wittgenstein's (1997: 27) definition of style as "general necessity sub specie eterni" in light of its debt to Spinoza (who first used the expression "sub specie aeternitatis"—albeit in an ontotheological context). The full force of Wittgenstein's short-circuiting of ethics, aesthetics, and style emerges against the backdrop of Spinoza's view that acting under the sign of eternity means adopting the perspective of god, from which the essential openness and unfinishedness of lived life appears as a closed and internally necessary whole; this in turn means that it is emphatically under the sign of eternity that human life acquires form, becomes an aesthetic whole—a story. In light of Spinoza's text, Wittgenstein's postulate of the "identity" of ethics and aesthetics can be read as implying the narrative, literary structure of life and the world—the substratum and substance of ethics and aesthetics.

   Testifying to the double fact that theory cannot avoid feeding on concrete experience and that the latter in turn is determined by the framework which it gives rise to (and whose prisoner it often becomes), the essays making up this issue's second section—"Theory and Practice"—stage productive dialogues from within the ethics-and-literature complex. They flesh out and concretize the preceding, squarely theoretical inquiries into the meaning of ethics-and-literature/aesthetics and the practice of ethical criticism. In testing their theoretical observations against (the resistance of) concrete works of literature, they allow us to witness ethics-and-literature *in actu*, as it were.

James Phelan's contribution is an attempt to stage and elaborate—in dialogue with Robert Frost's narrative lyric "Home Burial"—what he calls a "rhetorical literary ethics." Like other contributors to this special issue, Phelan, too, takes ethics and literature/aesthetics to be "inextricably intertwined." He approaches the ethical through the aesthetic in attending to the ethical import of *what* is represented in light of its ramifications for the *how* of representation (and vice versa). In other words, all ethical insights are generated on the basis of and in response to the "particularities of individual texts." While this in itself may seem neither noteworthy nor innovative—virtually every contemporary ethical critic has claimed to have been attending to the particularities of a given text—it does gain critical force from Phelan's reconceptualization of the notion of "form," in terms very similar to Wittgenstein's conception of style (elaborated by Stengel), as the overall subject of rhetorical literary ethics. Form, Phelan suggests, is the name for "the author's synthesis of the what and how of representation in the service of . . . communication." Form, in other words, is that dynamic "in" which the ethical shows itself aesthetically and "in" which the aesthetical shows itself as always already ethical. Rhetorical literary ethics, thus, ultimately aims at engaging with the author insofar as he or she manifests or articulates him- or herself in the form (read also: style) of his or her poetic utterances. And responding to the *individual* particularities of an author-qua-form/style adds a whole new layer of complexity and intricacy to attending to the particularities of a text-qua-material object (linguistic, semantic, structural, etc.). It is in his elaboration of a personalist notion of form as the dynamic manifestation of an author's ethos, to which we in turn respond, that I would locate Phelan's central contribution to ethical criticism.[11] Phelan's understanding and practice of form as the fulcrum of rhetorical literary ethics conceptually and pragmatically translates Eaglestone's and Stengel's reflections on Wittgenstein's claim regarding the unity of ethics and aesthetics on the basis of truth/style into the language and practice of ethical criticism proper, so to speak.

"Form" is also at the heart of Derek Attridge's "Ethical Modernism: Servants and Others in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction." However, Attridge engages with the question of form not so much through the prism of the author's creativity as through the prism of what he calls (with an approving nod to Derrida) the literary "event": the "event of meaning that constitutes the work of literature—the event that used to be called form." It

11. In addition to its proximity to Wittgenstein's "style," Phelan's personalist, dynamic, and synthetic notion of form is also close to Bakhtin's (1975: 85–86) notion of an author's "stylistic visage" and Benveniste's (1966: 325–35) notion of "rhythm."

is in the event of responding to (and, hence, co-constituting) the otherness, singularity, and inventiveness of the work of literature (and art in general) and not primarily in the *what* and the *how* of representation (to borrow Phelan's terms) that ethics-and-literature has its place. Ethical criticism, consequently, ought to be concerned first and foremost with doing justice to form-as-event, with responsively/responsibly participating in its co-creation. Attridge's valorization of the category of the event for our thinking about ethics-and-literature is predicated on a critique of representation, especially on the level of theme. The force of the ethical-in-the-literary does not depend, Attridge suggests, on the representation of ethically charged, challenging, or thought-provoking characters, incidents, or plots but, rather, as Coetzee's novels exemplarily testify, on a text's/author's comprehensive ability to introduce into the event of reading itself the sense of being ethically-aesthetically engaged. Attridge's concept and practice of ethical criticism is indebted to the aesthetics of formal innovation typical of that period which Kurt Pinthus already considered to be characterized by a "momentous turn toward the ethical," namely, modernism. To what extent then, we may ask, is the literary "event," as Attridge conceives of it, not merely a new, up-to-date name for the complex and varied modernist practice of playing with and displacing literary convention through formal innovation, experimentation, etc.?

Rey Chow's "Toward an Ethics of Postvisuality: Some Thoughts on the Recent Work of Zhang Yimou" suggests a response to this question and points to a mode of ethical criticism that takes into account and leaves behind some of the problems addressed in the previous essays. What makes Attridge's notion and practice of ethics-and-literature quite nonmodernist is the fact that it is predicated on a fundamental distrust of vision and representation. In contrast to the modernist emphasis on acute attention to reality and the world and, hence, on vision and perception as the springs of modernist aesthetics,[12] Attridge and other contemporary ethical critics valorize the nonrepresentational, nonvisual character of our engagement with alterity, including the alterity of literature. The disavowal of the visualization and representation of alterity (as ethically and politically inefficacious, if not outright perilous, insofar as all vision entails framing and, potentially, reducing the "other") in the name of the ethical force of the very alterity of the artwork itself bespeaks what Chow perceives as the iconophobia of ethics and, concurrently, the ethics of iconophobia—a surprising phenomenon, given the ubiquity of images in our world and the virtual impossibility of encountering the real "other" without relying on visual

12. One need only think here of T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams.

mediation.[13] Against these presumably iconophobic tendencies and in the name of alterity, Chow adduces the work of the Chinese film director Zhang Yimou, whose *Happy Times* (an apposite allusion to Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*?), she argues, "shows" an ethics of postvisuality that undermines the very opposition between the visual and the nonvisual. Both her choice of the cinematic medium *and* of an artist who embodies, culturally and politically, one of the West's many "others" are extremely felicitous. What better way to critique iconophobia than through images? And what better way to critique the philosophical assumptions underlying contemporary iconophobia in the name of the "other" (e. g., such binaries as same/other, identity/alterity, West/Non-West, etc.) than through the prism of precisely those who have been cast ("orientalized") as "other"—the Chinese in this case—and for whom there is "nothing ennobling or liberating about the notion of alterity per se"? An "ethics of postvisuality," Chow suggests, would obliterate the very distinctions that make parts of contemporary ethical criticism work against its own meliorative impetus.

The essays making up this issue's final section, "Practice and Theory," approach the question of ethics-and-literature squarely through readings of individual literary texts. Inversely mirroring the first, theoretical section and further concretizing the second section, these three essays testify to ethical criticism as a living, hands-on practice, as well as to its groundedness in and emergence from our responses to the demands of concrete works of literature (and art in general), thus appropriately rounding out the special issue as a whole.

Martha Nussbaum's discussion of "love" and "vision" on the basis of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince* (1973) can be considered a companion piece of sorts to Rey Chow's meditation on an ethics of postvisuality. Insofar as the latter does not imply the obliteration of vision (a factual impossibility) but, rather, the projected practice of a different kind of ethical "vision"—a "vision" that would be more just and more true to the give and take between the ever-changing identities and constellations of same and other—Iris Murdoch's (2001 [1971]: 64) philosophical reflection and literary practice of a "true vision" inspired by love as the core of ethical life can be read as anticipating and proleptically realizing Chow's theoretical vision. In paying particular attention to the ethical-aesthetic significance of the category of "love" (including its erotic aspect) as it is played out in Murdoch's

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13. In light of Chow's reflections, the influence of Emmanuel Levinas's antivisual ethics among deconstructive, postcolonial, feminist, and minority critics may be partially accounted for as a result of his (Levinas 1992 [1961]: 8) denunciation of vision and image as unethical, reductive, and, ultimately, destructive.

novel as well as in such earlier texts as Plato's *Phaedrus*, Dante's *Comedy*, and Proust's *Recherche*, Nussbaum infuses the "ethics and literature" debate with an emotional-psychological-erotic component that adds a deeply personal and "human" touch to it. Nussbaum's most significant interpretive move for the purposes of this special issue and my particular take on ethics-and-literature consists in suggesting—via Murdoch and Proust—that it is only in and through "our [loving, erotic] relationship with the literary work" that the other is at all accessible in his or her singularity.

The touch of loving vision contributed to this special issue by Martha Nussbaum becomes the key category in William Waters's conception of ethics-and-literature as predicated on "poetry's touch." Beginning from Rainer Maria Rilke's distinctive use of apostrophes throughout his poetry, Waters ponders the question of lyric address and its ethical import. How does poetry solicit our responsiveness and answerability? How does it affect us in such a way that we feel transported into the dimension of the ethical? Waters deals with these and other pertinent questions on the basis of a small number of exemplary poems by Rilke and reaches the conclusion that our sensation, intuition, perception, knowledge, or cognizance of the fact that in literature "aesthetic effect *is* . . . its ethical force" is ultimately based on our surrender to the very touch or grip of a given text. Rilke's poem "Snake-Charming"—with its emphasis on blinding vision—allows Waters to elaborate his corporeal, erotic notion of responsiveness and ethical responsibility. Interestingly, in attending to love and the erotics of reading as an integral component of ethical criticism, Nussbaum and Waters give new currency to precisely one of those critical-philosophical ventures that I mentioned at the outset of this introduction as having been for the longest time considered "unethical": poststructuralism. We cannot fail overhearing the grain of Roland Barthes's voice in Nussbaum's and, especially, Waters's ruminations on being erotically engaged, if not immediately aroused, by the literary text.

The concluding piece of this issue, Ulrich Kinzel's "Configuration and Government: Stefan George's *The Star of Covenant*," brings us back to the "momentous turn toward the ethical" hailed by Kurt Pinthus early on in the twentieth century. Through the exemplary prism of Stefan George's theory and practice of poetry as a socioethical "operator" and with particular attention to his *The Star of Covenant* (1914), Kinzel investigates the role of literature in and for the construction of an ethical community. Mapping George's endeavors to create a circle of chosen disciples around the altar of poetry onto Michel Foucault's inquiries into the "technologies of the self," Kinzel is particularly interested in the relationship between self and other as mediated through poetry. In highlighting the historical and social dimen-

sions of ethics-and-literature and, thereby, joining the circle that originated, among others, with Wayne C. Booth's literary *company*, Kinzel's essay is an appropriate stepping-off point for this collection.

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