

# Praxis of the Ethical Turn through Literature

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**Abstract---** “Interestingly,” states Michael Eskin, “the [...] ‘turn to ethics’ [...] in parts of the humanities [...] has its counterpart in (moral) philosophy’s ‘turn to literature.’” As he puts it, “ethics *needs* literature [...] to be fully integrated into the human and the social domain that it is ultimately concerned with.” Literature, a “more capacious, more universal *and* concrete [...] sign” translates abstract philosophical concepts into something that can “make us *see* and *feel* [...] in a way no philosophical treatise can.”

In the current background of critical self-consciousness, academic professionalization has reverted to re- think about the purpose behind all teaching and writing. My paper aims at the ethical turn which this post-structural world has risen to. The contemporary times are taking turns to re-instate the ethics much lost in the age of industrialization leading to ‘a global village.’ David Williams explains ‘Before you’ve practiced, the theory is useless. After you’ve practiced, the theory is obvious.’

**Keywords----** Ethical turn, narratives, praxis, universality

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Interestingly,” states Michael Eskin, “the [...] ‘turn to ethics’ [...] in parts of the humanities [...] has its counterpart in (moral) philosophy’s ‘turn to literature.’” As he puts it, “ethics *needs* literature [...] to be fully integrated into the human and the social domain that it is ultimately concerned with.” [8] Literature, a “more capacious, more universal *and* concrete [...] sign” translates abstract philosophical concepts into something that can “make us *see* and *feel* [...] in a way no philosophical treatise can.” If philosophy has one ‘fiction’ of ‘moral truth,’ literature has manifold ‘truth’ of the ‘fiction’ of literature. Thus literature is ethics in the second degree, as ethics of ethics or criticism of ethics. The literary turn of ethics which is against 20<sup>th</sup> century formalism and post structuralism has a parallel to concern with fiction. The perfect blend of the particular and the universal that informs literature makes of it a potent vehicle for ethics for putting theory into praxis. There are figures like Edward Said, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Altieri and Paul Ricoeur who have argued that ethical responsibility can be further within the framework of traditional humanism especially when this abstract concept is opened up to the participation of other disciplines. Theorists like Martha Nussbaum, Michael Eskin have drawn attention towards the importance of narrative fictions that interpolate us ethically throughout our lives.

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## II. THE BEGINNINGS- AN ETHICAL TURN

The subject which, according to Hegel, Socrates ‘invented (and) added to ...philosophy’ continued to be informed by its roots in its predecessor and ‘begetter’ in matters of the discursive engagement with human life, interaction, and conduct namely poetry. Homer, Hesiod, Pindar constituted a pre-philosophical moral tradition which provided Socrates and Plato with the basics of ethics, how we ought to live and act so to live a good life.

This needs cooperation from other disciplines and makes literature a cultural field for praxis. In the midst of this humanist revival, the representation between author and reader is the representation of an ethical relationship. Despite of deconstructive modes of readings and interpretations, the readers are always pressed with the hermeneutical enquiries that trouble their minds with the inherent significance of the work; towards the ethical component of the criticism. Wolfgang Iser explains the reading process to be collation of subjectivity and objectivity into one, very similar to what is Husserl and Heidegger’s consciousness: consciousness where the author and the reader meet out of their respective subjectivities. And this objectivity is attainable in the realm of values in such areas as ethics and even aesthetics.

The ethical 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.). Concomitantly, the literary turn in contemporary, especially Anglo-American, philosophy—is 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.[10] In the ‘Aristotelian’ family of texts, we are shown how false moral, political, and social thought may be premised on abstractions, and how such thought lacks ties with, lacks nourishment from, the realities of concrete individual lives. For Wordsworth and for the ‘Aristotelian’ texts, dependence on

abstract conceptions of humanity is linked to failure in imaginative life, which is contrasted with life nourished by imaginative response to individuals, and by stories.

The yarns spun by the writers around the virtues, vices, characters, situations and language serve philosophers – as touchstones for their theoretical reflections. It is true that poetry was there before philosophy and prior to ethics ‘the poets...were understood...to be the central ethical teachers and thinkers.’[7](Nussbaum 1990:15) And literature as a site of the moral import has always been the subject of debate among poets, critics and philosophers beginning with Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle in the famous ninth chapter of *Poetics* writes: it is not the poet’s function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of possibility and necessity.’(ibid) He has in mind poetry in general, and specific genres of epic and tragedy poetry as well as comedy...all kinds of mimesis called to be literature.

The ‘turn towards the ethical’ within literary studies is closely connected to a turn to the literary within ethics. This suggests continuous but swayed resurgence unlike that associated with Dr Johnson, Matthew Arnold or F. R. Leavis but this one which is significantly engaged in what Cora Diamond calls ‘revolutionary act’ of reading novels. [4] Richard Rorty explains this in the contemporary paradigm shift from positivism to the culture of pragmatism where science is one genre of literature as the literature and arts as inquiries share the same footing.

### III. READING: A ‘REVOLUTIONARY ACT’

This ‘revolutionary act’ of reading novels involves whole discipline of moral philosophy: to read imaginative literature imaginatively against philosophy’s characteristic unimaginativeness and even its anti-imaginativeness. To read it with your heart as well as head, with your whole soul as well as rational faculties, is an act of dare-devilry, challenging the sovereign powers, the gods of neatness, logic and clarity.

Literature requires us ‘to read with a different sort of eye’ as it abounds in studies of individual mentalities, and exploration of the need to look through different eyes. In fact this ability to take imaginative leaps is needed and one should be trained or encouraged to develop. This process fruitfully leads to learning through unlearning. To take a plunge, to allow change into one’s eyes and mind, is indeed a revolutionary act. To achieve new insight entails loss – loss of security, loss of the world as one previously knew it.

### IV. LITERATURE AND ETHICS – A CO-EXISTENCE

Though we are considering ethical turn in the contemporary times, the notion of the ‘turn’ does not diminish the presence of the ethics in the past; it is simply to check against the ‘radical progression’ in all the disciplines. It is apt to note here the marked increase in the awareness of the necessity to include narratives in their respective studies. In 1970’s and 1980’s the explicit ‘ethical criticism’ had fallen on hard times’ (Wayne Booth) [13]. In these years literary theory was more or less silent about ethics or suspicious about it. In *Love’s*

*Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Martha Nussbaum talks of the strange ‘absence of the ethical’ in literary theory. During these decades the practice oriented theory was overtly political concerned with issues of race gender, class and sexuality. What begins as a just project for the proper political recognition of difference can easily tip over into a zealous intolerance of it. It is this intolerance that has come to be called ‘political correctness’. But what Nussbaum calls ‘the organising questions of moral philosophy’, and specifically the question of how we should live, are rarely if ever explicitly addressed. Richard Bernstein, in his book on the ‘ethical–political horizons of post-modernity’, is surely right when he says that although ‘we can distinguish ethics and politics, they are inseparable.[11] For we cannot understand ethics without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities. And there is no understanding of politics that does not bring us back to ethics.’

One dominant vein of the political criticism that has been hostile to ethics is Marxism; it legitimates ‘One’ against its binary opposite. The hegemonic group characterizes the ‘Other’ and thus ethics remains an ideological mask of the dominant. Here ethics is inevitably ‘judgmental.’ One of the defining features was the ‘logic of binary oppositions as also logic of subordination and domination’ (Seyla Benhabib) which aims at the concept of good life: a life of freedom, self-expression and self-realisation. Thus ethics and literature in philosophy and literary study have always remained enmeshed, even in the most ‘unethical’ critical-philosophical ventures of the twentieth century such as structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Even these have been too implicitly ethical as Wayne Booth notes that they, too, ‘have an ethical program in mind.’

However, on the other hand there is a reductive view where the moral is restricted to ‘interpersonal relations’ as opposed to the political. Here the ethical is ideological, or a form of false consciousness, the true alternative to which is political consciousness. Terry Eagleton finds a middle path and argues that political argument is ‘genuine moral argument’ which extends beyond the sphere of interpersonal relations. Thus, it validates what Richard Bernstein says that although ‘we can distinguish ethics and politics, they are inseparable.’

Kant says that we need the “power of judgment sharpened by experience” to tell us how to apply moral laws to particular cases. And Aristotle says that general rules “have some validity, but truly the decision lies in the facts of life and deeds, for the authority lies in these.” For “such matters depend on the particular circumstances, and the decision lies with perception.” Our Kantian perception enables us to classify recognizable actions into categories of fact, reason and will but we cannot recognize ‘character’ which comes within the problematic category of value. We can see what people *do* but not *what they are, how they do and what they mean*. Thus criticizing someone’s thought and behavior is an obscure way to simplify into classification.

The critics in this area like Bernard Williams and Cora Diamond have also explained this by arguing against T.S. Eliot's concept of 'dissociation'. To their belief this results in giving the arbitrary, unconnected and absurd decisions. Why 'reason' is the moral guide of the self.

To understand it better let us think of a spectrum of self-transcendence where Aristotle's 'non reductive humanism' and Plato's 'ethical other worldliness' meet. The self is not irreducible and unchanging but continually developing reality which transcends the self without dissolving it. On one side of this core is what both Gaita and Murdoch call 'non dogmatic mysticism' (intuition) and on the other hand we have Mac Intyre or an Anscombe's dogmatic metaphysics.[9] Literature has most consciously explored these various types of self-transcendence, and even the philosophers have assumed them to be 'the unacknowledged legislators of systems of thought'.

There is a sense of mystery tied to story making imagination, a spirit of response to life with author's mind going on to find thoughts of what, how, when and what answers. On the contrary the abstract moral deliberator has no capacities that can be shown only through their development. Thus a moral psychology may require presentation through a story of development, intended to lead the reader to make sense of the pattern of growth or change in a particular way.

The texts imply an idea of what reflection about morality is, an idea that contrasts with our usual philosophical reflection on morality. It then engages and exercises our creative imagination; this is missing altogether in the standard philosophical approach.

In a philosophical text a central figure is the implied author not an artist, he is a detached investigator. Whereas the 'artist' texts imply a view of the very subject moral thinking; not a lie still to be investigated but is shaped in new ways, in reader's imaginative responses to life. It also is the importance in ethics of attending to the particularities of the cases confronting moral theories where moral reasoning is characterized by universality and provide fixed, uniform guidance in advance of actual situations.

Iris Murdoch has emphasized, the 'complexity' and 'difficulty' of moral life which Nussbaum says is well articulated in the literature's more disorderly but spontaneity as against tidiness of philosophy. The schematic philosophy would point out what is strictly relevant whereas story would revitalize the reader through displaying the dilemmas of its characters forced to be interpreted by the readers. Literature is less fastidious, more adventurous, 'mixt of all stuffes' jumble (J.Donne) presenting in it the mysterious un-nailable fluidity of experience. It pictures the concepts that gives substance to our being. Conversely, philosophy is trim, relevant and goal directed. The two are so often at cross-purposes that both have to be included in the discourse on ethics and morality.

The overtly categorization in the world of philosophy simplifies by denying the reality and results in loss and shrinkage of concepts. And the works of literature explore the blurriness and leakiness of such supposedly watertight compartments. With the characters, readers or the audience

too are jarred out of their previous modes of understanding, surprised into new perceptions, values and beliefs. Thus, needless to say that as ever novels, plays, and poetry continue to be published proving that why literature is rightly esteemed as highly particularized, complex and richly contextualized mode of ethical reflection – a uniquely valuable mode that enables to ponder moral questions in ways unanswerable to conventional philosophical discourse. Colin McGinn observes that the "fictional work can make us see and feel good and evil in a way no philosophical treatise can—unless it takes on board what literary works achieve so well."

Ihab Hassan has rightly professed that this is not a time for professors of literature to ignore the judgments of human passions. And although the emphasis varies from critic to critic, we can surely identify several concepts shared by the humanists. Since Plato and Aristotle, through Kant, Satre, Adorno, Levinas the questions of morality, ethos, duty and responsibility have always been the very meaning of literature and it continues to be today with contemporary buzzwords such as call of the other, alterity, interpellation etc. This re-shaping of 'what has always existed' in fact creates new texts with unprecedented impetuses toward a particular present. The novelty on the part of the contemporary ethical criticism is twofold – re-articulation and re-contextualisation of an established epistemological- hermeneutic framework and displacement and re-fashioning of it in the cultural and socio-historical conditions and demands of the present (Eskin 560). It is credited with innovative force for the iterable significance by revisiting, displacing and even re-inscribing the extant reflections on their interface. The re-iterability also re-emphasises the common view that literature is somehow ethically more effective than moral philosophy.

## VI. AESTHETICS

Further like Wittgenstein, James Phelan too, takes ethics and literature / aesthetics to be 'inextricably intertwined 'in attending to the ethical import of what is represented in light of its ramifications for the how of representation (and vice versa). Both the critics are enforcing the personalist, dynamic and synthetic notion of 'form' in which ethics and aesthetics show each other. Derek Attridge gives another view of this 'form' which instead of author's creativity is the literary 'event' – the otherness, singularity and inventiveness of the work of literature and not primarily in the *what* and the *how* of representation. It is a text's /author's comprehensive ability to introduce into the event of reading itself the sense of being ethically-aesthetically engaged. We can consider the novels written by J Coetzee to exemplify the above.

The critics like Martha Nussbaum and William Walters have studied **the praxis of the ethical import** in literature. With them we can conclude 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. **Our daily struggle with the meanings and consequences of our actions is often understood in**

**narrative structures.** We are immersed in narrative in almost every aspect of our lives. Conversely when the question is generalized - "Do you think that a large share of your ethical education, your construction as a person, was performed by stories, from infancy on?" - most answer decisively, "Yes." They agree that when we really engage with the characters we meet and the moral choices those characters face, ethical changes occur in us, for good or ill-especially when we are young. No one who has thought about it for long can deny that we are at least partially constructed, in our most fundamental moral character, by the stories we have heard, or read, or viewed, or acted out in amateur theatricals: the stories we have really *listened* to.

#### VII. PRAXIS OF NARRATIVES

Literature's ethico-political effectiveness is based on the fact that it takes its audience out of domain of 'actual events' into 'invented' one and the readers enjoy contemplating the images which are otherwise painful. Rather than avoiding or fleeing them, 'literature can function as the ethical medium par excellence, as equipment for living.' [Burke]

Martha Nussbaum has successfully shown the significance of literary texts for moral philosophy is through her readings of particular novels and her raising questions, through those readings, about the ties between text and moral vision, show us that there are no short cuts: the only way to see what kinds of moral thinking may be found in literary texts is by giving them sensitive attention, of a sort we are not trained or encouraged, as philosophers, to give them. She believes that there is a kind of philosophical inquiry which, without the novels, would be seriously incomplete. The philosophical inquiry she has in mind is the inquiry how one should live; it involves, besides the working out and full expression of particular answers to that question, a kind of reflective critical comparison of those answers. Since some important answers to the inquiry can, she argues, be presented only in novels, novels are necessary to the inquiry. She has argued that emotional response is 'a constituent part of the best sort of recognition or knowledge of one's practical situation: suffering, for example is 'a kind of knowing.' Ethical perception in being both cognitive and affective at the same time is essential to literature.

#### VIII. AN EXAMPLE

Cora Diamond in "Martha Nussbaum and the need for novels" beautifully explains the sense of particularity'. She takes the example of poem 'Ducks' where the poet Walter de la Mare presents different kinds of ducks; at the same time teaching the importance of an individual life:

All these are *kinds*. But every Duck  
Himself is, and himself alone:  
Fleet wing, arched neck, webbed foot, round eye,  
And marvellous cage of bone.  
Clad in this beauty a creature dwells  
Of sovran instinct, sense and skill;

Yet secret as the hidden wells  
Whence Life itself doth rill.

Martha Nussbaum suggests that literature "cultivate[s] our ability to see and care for particulars" while simultaneously catering to our "interest in the universal and in the universalizability of ethical judgments."

#### IX. GENERALITY OR UNIVERSALITY?

The response to particularity is where moral life enters and even Wordsworth finds 'the face of everyone that passes by one is a mystery'; each is himself, this man, with this face, with his one life. Here, the *particularity* must not be misunderstood to be *generality* which may result to unfair application as it tend to be confused with *universality* which is not given up here.

'Universality' in Edward Said's thought has an ethical and humanitarian, rather than an intellectual role to play. Said's interest lies in examining the relationship between truth and universality and the application of concepts in particular, subjective spaces. The fundamental problem is therefore how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society, and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, and peoples. 'Universality' in Said's terms has its basis in humanistic principles, but universal ethical truths are subject to contrapuntal discussion and amendment. Even Julia Kristeva writes in a passage representative of the continuous presence of Aristotle's thought, that literature "takes the most concrete signifieds, concretizes them to the utmost degree, and, simultaneously raises them to a level of universality which surpasses that of conceptual discourse. . . . The poetic signified . . . is simultaneously concrete and universal."

#### X. CONCLUSION

Literature and philosophy can both show these essentials-essential within it, and essential in our reception to it – but not in the same way. They have their different ways of thinking morally; real mediation between the two is both important and difficult.

Thus, ethical criticism focuses from reader's life through the literary characters to the author's commitment that shaped the production and performance of narrative. Even Frederick Jameson says that the predominant 'code' that goes in making of literature is its being ethical: 'the moral conflict' of the protagonist.

Henry James in his 'The Art of Fiction' remarks that the authors 'hardest and highest task' is to 'make ourselves infallible,' to escape being muddled, bewildered and blind. Without this there could never be a story. The act of reading through process of revolution involves relinquishing many of the previous personal lucidities and theories about life, gradually learning to read with a different sort of eye and slowly coming to realize what Martha Nussbaum aptly calls 'the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty' of

actual moral experience. The readers as they plunge into the abyss of ambiguities attend and struggle to orient themselves drawing their energy and character from the quality of the writers. Like painters and other artists even the poets enable readers to find how lucidities sometimes shine when you forbear to seize them.

Finally, to end on the note of Iris Murdoch who constantly talks about literature as being something between an 'analogy' and a 'case' of moral thought. And reading it, taking it seriously, criticizing it, is therefore also a mode of ethical reflection, she says: 'the most educational of all human activities'.

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