

**Reading Responsibly between Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas:
Towards a Textual Ethics for the Twenty-First Century**

Introduction: “a quarrel of long standing”

In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), Martha Nussbaum observes an interdisciplinary move whereby literary theory and philosophy both now investigate questions of epistemology and metaphysics. Yet for Nussbaum, there remains a “striking absence: the absence, from literary theory, of the organizing questions of moral philosophy” (170). Nussbaum’s critique in *Love's Knowledge* is indicative of a blinding rift between the so-called “Analytic” and “Continental” traditions through the second half of the twentieth century. Driven perhaps into competing critical camps by the cultural forces of humanist and post-structuralist persuasions there has been little productive debate between these parallel forms of knowledge in departments either of Literary Studies or of Philosophy. But the challenge to a more thorough interdisciplinary engagement is to recognize that the literary theory that includes epistemology and metaphysics is also fundamentally concerned with ethics. Indeed, the strand of ethical criticism emergent in Continental philosophy – since Emmanuel Levinas first championed “ethics as first philosophy” (Levinas 1989, 75) – grounds metaphysics in ethics. In *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999), Jill Robbins summarizes the paradigm shift:

Within recent Continental philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas has decisively renewed the question of the ethical. In a manner somewhat analogous to Heidegger’s retrieval of the forgotten question of being, Levinas repeats and revisits an entire philosophical tradition from the vantage point of the forgetting of the ethical. (1999, xiii)

In an ambitious gesture, this article invites interdisciplinary literary studies to re-examine the meta-language of literary criticism and to re-frame the question of ethics debated by the

philosophers and the poets since the sixth century BC. By bringing into comparative analysis the major works of two of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century, Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas, a claim is made for a methodical working through of their philosophical differences. The article thereby embarks on the design of a roadmap to bridge Analytic and Continental philosophy and to set out the direction for a better understanding of the textual encounter, that is, reading as an ethical work with the text providing the structural relations between self and other in language. Furthermore, it is by advancing the term “textual ethics” that both epistemology and subjectivity are recognized as a process of intertextuality, but *only* in a language (in discourse as in aesthetics) for which we are responsible – a language that ultimately is perceived by, reimagined, and profoundly speaks of us as – social human beings. In *Textual Ethos Studies, or Locating Ethics* (2005), Anna Fahraeus clarifies this new approach to ethical criticism:

The production of ethos – as a position or manner of relating to the world in terms of an ethics – occurs in the encounter with the text. This means that the ethos of a text is not seen as (wholly) autonomously present and extractable without the subject but as heterogeneously produced in the temporal process of reading. (2005, 13-14)

Rather than positioning the counter-traditions of Analytic and Continental philosophy, represented here by Nussbaum and Levinas, as determining opposite understandings of this textual encounter, this article hopes to show how they are both required for a literary criticism that is socially responsible, and that has a social value beyond its own self-reflexive or aesthetic investigations. Indeed, it is in defense of the humanities that a very old question at the heart of the English discipline is currently recharged, that is, the question of the ethical grounding of literary criticism itself. In this, the imperative is made clear: contemporary society needs, not only, as Paul Benneworth suggests, a “new morality of public governance”

(2013, n.p.) but, most urgently, it is concluded, a reworked textual ethics for the twenty-first century.

The Turn to Ethics in Literary Criticism: Martha Nussbaum's Ethical Appeal

The question of literature's ethical power first reemerged in the birth pains of a modern English discipline in the early twentieth century, and it is a question that continues to be debated whenever the purpose of that discipline is properly considered. Over the last thirty years, in particular, there has been a rigorous attempt to address the foundational question of the ethics of literary criticism. Alongside many important book-length studies and recent anthologies of literary ethics, key moments of critical reflection and advance in this thirty-year period are the essays brought together in the special issues of *New Literary History* (1983), *Ethics* (1988), *Literature and Philosophy* (1998), *PMLA* (1999), and *Poetics Today* (2004). A first pioneer, it was a decision by Ralph Cohen in 1983 (then editor of *New Literary History*) which introduced a vigorous debate concerning the nature of the relationship between literature and moral philosophy. Bringing together a number of key voices in ethical criticism for a special issue entitled "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy," its central piece is a now famous essay on Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* (1904) by the literary critic, humanitarian advisor, and distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics at University of Chicago, Martha Nussbaum. In addressing the possibility of a co-disciplinarity between philosophy and literary studies, and with Nussbaum's work as its centerpiece, *New Literary History* provoked a significant re-thinking of the fundamental questions of definition, purpose, and meaning. Murray Krieger's essay adopted the widest context provocatively calling out an "aesthetic disinterestedness" and "philosophical deterioration" within literary criticism alongside the "skepticism of semiotic studies" and a "loss of ontological security" (1983, 121). For the contributors to *New Literary History* in 1983,

literary criticism had reached a crisis point, unable to deal with moral and ethical considerations.

In a later book entitled *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995), Nussbaum followed up on these arguments to describe the phenomenological moment that raises the ontological, political, and social questions resonant throughout her scholarly work. She writes:

Consider, now, what it is to see a human being. Perception represents a physical object, possibly in motion. It has a certain shape, rather like the one we ascribe to ourselves. Well, how do we really know what sort of physical object this is and how to behave toward it? (1995, 38)

Nussbaum's complex and multi-faceted body of work often begins with this most basic and universal experience, and indeed, with the questions it raises. For the interhuman moment is a profound and natural experience: it marks the beginnings of the existential, opens the individual to new possibilities, and it is the prerequisite of relationship, the inaugural moment of responsibility. As Nussbaum writes in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), crucial in this interhuman moment is "the ability to see people as human beings, not simply as objects" (6). And yet, she suggests, "we seem to be forgetting... what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument" (6). Thus Nussbaum rejects both a Kantian ethics (to ask, in a given situation, "what is my moral duty?") as well as Utilitarianism in the ethical life (to ask, "How shall I maximize utility?). For Nussbaum, both these questions separate ethics off from the nature of the individual, or from individual moral character, and in their material pragmatism neglect any account of the (moral) imagination (Nussbaum 1990, 173).

The subtle brilliance of Nussbaum's Aristotelian ethics is that she focuses clearly on the moral actions rather than on the morality of the agent, while, at the same time, it is the morality of those actions that in her ethics provides for moral character. Nussbaum writes:

To become a person of just character is to develop patterns of desire and concern that will motivate one, in a wide variety of circumstances, to choose the just action for its own sake; it is also to develop abilities of perception and vision that will enable one to discern, in a wide variety of concrete circumstances, what the just action might be. (1988, 333)

This philosophically adept maneuver makes the virtuous disposition of the subject "morally transparent" in order to focus on the actions themselves as determinant of moral character (1988, 334). The philosophical introspection and hermeneutical skepticism regarding autonomous subjectivity that haunts much poststructuralist thinking is thus avoided. In *Character, Virtue Theories, and the Vices* (1999), Christine McKinnon summarizes Nussbaum's position: "A self-conscious attempt to develop a moral character need not be characterized by this kind of self-reflexive concern" (227).

But what is the process whereby human beings develop the capacity for mutual recognition? For Nussbaum, the cognitive faculty and emotional capacity required in the interhuman moment is enabled most efficiently in the process of reading literary fiction. It is in reading works of fiction that the citizen can exercise what Nussbaum calls, "the narrative imagination" (2010, 95). Without this, she argues, "factual knowledge and logic" are of little use; rather it is by exploring fictional works that the science of narrative is comprehended together with the process whereby "a narrative is assembled from evidence" (95). Beginning with the universal phenomena of the face-to-face experience and the intimate engagement of reading literary fiction, this was the philosophical wager of Nussbaum's 1983 article "Flawed Crystals," setting out her principle belief that it is in the characterization of sophisticated

emotional and rational responses that the reader finds the ethics of the literary work elucidated. Analyzing reader-response, for example, she writes:

It is only when, as here, we study the loves and attentions of a finely responsive mind such as Maggie's, through all the contingent complexities of a tangled human life, that the force of these ideas begins to make itself felt. (1983, 41)

In reading the works of Henry James, Nussbaum had observed “an intelligent maker of a moral vision who embodied it in novels because only in that form could he fully and fittingly express it” (1983, 44). Drawing on her in-depth knowledge of “the Socratic assessment process” (1983, 45) in combination with a philosophical neo-humanist teleology of the individual life, Nussbaum described a moral theory of literature and a practice of reading that fostered “the narrative imagination” (1983, 95). In the experience of reading a novel with a complex set of moral problems and competing personal involvements, as in the case of James's novels, Nussbaum explains that there is required “an activity of exploration and unraveling that uses abilities... emotion and imagination,” which are “important parts of the moral assessment process” (1983, 45). As she later amplifies in *Poetic Justice*: “it gets the readers involved with the characters... their hopes and fears,” and in this way helps readers “to acknowledge their own world and to choose more reflectively in it” (1995, 31).

It is not incidental that the literary work takes on an ethical dimension for Nussbaum in the combination of the “exploratory power” of the novel to narrate the “length and breadth of a human life” and the “presence of a character who will count as a high case of the human response to value” (1983, 41). In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum develops this theme to give an account of the imperative for her investigations into the ethics of literature. First, Nussbaum explains that her interest begins “from the fact that, like David Copperfield, I was a child whose best friends were, on the whole, novels – a serious and, for a long time, solitary child” (1990, 11). This experience fused with her academic pursuits in adulthood as a scholar

of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. Nussbaum, as I have suggested, works from what she calls “the Aristotelian procedure” (1990, 24), at the beginning historically, in fact, of the study of ethics, that is, with Aristotle’s attempt to answer the questions posed by Socrates and Plato in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Central to Nussbaum’s ethical thought are Aristotle’s two Greek terms, *eudaimonia*, the happiness or flourishing of a human being and, *arête*, the virtues or excellence through which such aspiration is fulfilled. Nussbaum finds in the “Aristotelian procedure” what she calls an “inclusive dialectical method” (unlike the Kantian or Utilitarian perspectives) by which all forms of behavior may be assessed within a holistic view of a lived experience (1990, 25). Nussbaum’s literary ethics thus emerges as a language of capabilities, rather than the more conventional language of human rights. Her public belief is thus in the developmental, primary value of childhood education and, in particular, literacy and reading, extending into adolescence and adulthood, and which contribute intrinsically towards a unity of character and the capacity for human flourishing.

A second key to Nussbaum’s ethical thought links back to the history of literary criticism, for it was at Harvard University in 1969 that she met with a “literary resistance” and “contempt” – “by no means unique to Harvard” – towards “ethical criticism of literature” (1990, 12). Indeed, Nussbaum’s ethical interest is cultivated from her “sense of the force and inevitability of certain questions” that were intentionally side-lined as “the New Criticism waned and Deconstruction took over” (1990, 10, 21). For Nussbaum, the reading of novels is part of “the searching we pursue” in order to understand how best to live and, indeed, a process that channels the force of persistent and fundamental questions of responsibility and political belief (1990, 24). Thus in describing the “Aristotelian procedure,” Nussbaum suggests that “one of the salient virtues of this method is its continuity with ‘our actual experience’ as we search for understanding” (1990, 25). It is, for her, a lifelong pursuit of personal morality in line with public responsibility, an argument that she advances in *Poetic*

Justice. Nussbaum writes: “literary works are... artificial constructions of some crucial elements in a norm of public rationality,” thereby providing ethical instruction for civil responsibility; “valuable guides,” as she suggests, “to correct response” (1995, 78).

As philosopher, Nussbaum sees literature working through the reasoning of moral philosophy, and she argues that the moral guardian can find the rarified abstractions of philosophical discourse grounded in the world of the literary novel. Specific circumstances and particularities of the virtues (*arêtes*) may be given a character and emotional maturity; the possibility of a human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is dramatized through the singularity of a character’s worldview.¹ Accordingly, it is incumbent upon the critic to re-examine the imaginary realm of the literary aesthetic and to champion it as literature’s unique capacity to replicate the multifold dimensions of its represented world. For the literary ethicist, the finest of this immersive media may transport us into the lives and experiences of others; it provides a world and a people living out human universals, a world into which the reader brings a committed empathy whilst maintaining a real world distance or detachment just as is considered necessary for effective moral evaluations. Using the multiple perspectives of a richly woven narrative, it is argued, the novel thus has a special capacity to draw us into moral deliberations.

Wayne C. Booth’s *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) proved significant in popularizing this neo-humanistic, narrative mode of ethical criticism. Booth writes: “I cannot, as sophisticated reader, hope for Elizabeth Bennet’s marriage to Darcy or fear Tess Durbeyfield’s doom without *my* hoping and fearing those things” (205). Booth explains that it is by attending to the “patterning of who we are, for the duration” that we engage in the ethics of reading: “our interest here is in how we are shaped” (1988, 206). Nussbaum subsequently questioned the implied social act of both Booth’s “coduction” (that places evaluative judgments within a nested intertextuality), and his metaphor of friendship

(that equates a fictional character with a real person in terms of ethical experience).² Indeed, for Nussbaum, Booth's over-commitment to the subjectivism of aesthetic considerations leads him to a position of (moral) relativism that ultimately undercuts his project of an ethical criticism ("Wanting to accept and believe all candidates for truth," Nussbaum concludes, "he reaches the verge of giving up on reason-based ethical judgment" [1989, 180]). Nonetheless, Nussbaum and Booth both argue that it is in the identification and mirror alignment of subjectivities that the reader enters into an exploration of morality that is character building. The moral exemplars of a didactic, epistolary form will be less persuasive than the dilemmas present in the psychological depth of a character exhibiting both virtue and vice, but fundamentally both of these novelistic strategies will work together towards the social purpose of literature as an adjustment value of personhood.

Nussbaum's philosophical wager met its most forceful opposition at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1998 and in papers by Richard Posner (with Nussbaum and Booth responding) published in *Literature and Philosophy* in 1997 and 1998. Whilst Posner represented a popular rejection of the ethical value of literature – "moral content... is merely the writer's raw material" (1997, 7) he argued – he also made incisive criticisms of Nussbaum's literary approach.³ Whilst Nussbaum and Booth eloquently defend their ethical positions in *Literature and Philosophy*, there are nonetheless several problems with Nussbaum's literary ethics that cannot be resolved within its own logic. For whilst Nussbaum claims a fundamental inclusivity, her literary ethics is, on the contrary, fully proscriptive of a particular form (narrative) and of a single representational mode (mimesis). Furthermore, Nussbaum's evaluative mode is proscriptive too of its ethics, that is, it works exclusively on the basis of an Aristotelian notion of individual well-being.

By focusing on "a certain type of narrative literature" (Nussbaum 1995, xvi) that which embodies the Socratic ideal by providing "visions of humanity, expressions of a

complete sense of a social life” (1995, 2) Nussbaum maps out “a distinctive alternative to Kantian and Utilitarian conceptions” (1990, 24). There is, however, a necessary selectivity in this method of ethical reading that would trouble more widely accepted conventions of literary criticism. For in proscribing a realist, narrative fiction, and an authorial perspective calibrated to neo-Aristotelian humanism, Nussbaum re-creates a canon of (largely nineteenth century) realist fiction as *the* list of works for the moral edification of young minds. Furthermore, with regards to other forms of writing such as lyric poetry, for instance, which she does briefly address in *Poetic Justice*, they are relevant for Nussbaum only insofar as they are committed “both to narrative and to the concrete depiction of different ways of life” (1995, 7; Nussbaum chooses to discuss Walt Whitman’s 1855 long, narrative poem, “Song of Myself”). Indeed, in Nussbaum’s conception of literary ethics the possibilities of other literary forms which might subvert “the bonds of identification and sympathy” (1995, 7), and propose alternative reader-relations through their experimentation, are considerably curtailed.

Despite these limitations, Nussbaum’s account of the “narrative imagination” (1995, 95) is an important contribution to debates concerning the ethics of literature. The “play back and forth” that she describes in the narrative form – a movement between the universal and the particular – has indeed, even over a more complicated history of the novel than Nussbaum allows, been “built into the very structure of the genre” (1995, 8). Furthermore, whilst Nussbaum’s literary ethics prescribes a selective literary canon, it also paradoxically follows the first and second wave identity politics of cultural theory to open up the canon to minority and marginalised voices. Ultimately, it is through such stories that we do in fact develop in Nussbaum’s humanities program, “the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person,” and by their inclusion, to “address particular cultural blind spots” (2010, 108).

The critical moment made sharply visible by the 1983 *New Literary History* special issue was the catalyst for what has since become known in its broader context as the “turn to ethics” in literary criticism. Yet for those of a poststructuralist persuasion, the reputation of ethics as a whole remains tarnished, and is derided for its transcendental appeal (as explored in the next section) or universal claims (as Nussbaum risks) before being ultimately sidelined as pre-“Theory”, naïve and dogmatic in its essentialism. For others, ethical criticism has increasingly triumphed as the dominant and mainstream practice, establishing a neo-humanist reconsideration of the moral compass of the author central to the ethics of reading. But perhaps for too many, unsure of the shifting ground of post-millennial ontological and textual parameters in the making of both subjectivity and meaning, the ethical imperative is the last, and unspoken, white elephant. Nonetheless, the evaluative, narrative mode of literary ethics is the hallmark of the philosophical co-disciplinarity provided by Nussbaum. By choosing to focus on the novels of Henry James, as she suggested in her reflections in 2009 for *New Literary History*, Ralph Cohen also “steered the debate... to a close affiliation with the revival of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics” (762).

Negotiating the Ethical Turn: Emmanuel Levinas’ “Ethics as First Philosophy”

It was around the turn of the millennium that the debate over the “turn to ethics” split wide open. Lawrence Buell’s introduction to a *PMLA* special issue in 1999 on “Ethics and Literary Study” challenged the notion of a “unitary ethics movement,” describing instead a richly detailed “pluriform discourse” that “interweaves many genealogical strands” (7). A year later he wrote of a “groundswell of still uncertain magnitude” in a collection of essays on *The Turn to Ethics* (2000, 1). By 2004, for Michael Eskin the study of literary ethics had “unquestionably consolidated into a burgeoning subdiscipline” (557). Another year later, Stephen K. George claimed in his introduction to the second edition of *Ethics, Literature, and*

Theory: An Introductory Reader that “we are indeed on the cusp of an ethical renaissance within literary-philosophical studies” (2005, xvi). And yet with any critical excitement what are claimed to be radical “turns” are often no more than mere cycles of fashion, modes of criticism that take prominence and precedent according to political positioning and persuasion. Even then, as Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack explain in their preface to *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*: “ethical critics, like cartographers, do not necessarily discover or make a territory but, instead, describe and give shape to what has always existed” (2001, ix).

In the light of the remarkable dominance of the ethical and its privileged valence as a central term in contemporary literary critical discourse Eskin’s re-contextualization of the perceived double “turn” of the 1980s – “a ‘turn to ethics’ in literary studies and, conversely, a ‘turn to literature’ in (moral) philosophy” (2004, 557) – retains an instructive cautionary force. Introducing the 2004 special issue of *Poetics Today*, Eskin reminds us once again 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” (559). Indeed, Eskin is astute to note that there has been no “(radical) veering off from hitherto accepted intellectual practices implied in the notion of ‘turn’” (558). But more than this, the popular ethical readings of the post-millennial era have in fact revealed a deeply held conservatism – a discipline that persists with its essential epistemological scaffolding intact despite its many post-structural deconstructions. Writing out such philosophical problems, a smooth continuum is doctored to reinforce a tradition extending through philosophy and literature since Plato and aiming to re-stake the center ground of literary studies. The popular reification of the “ethical turn” marks most dramatically then a reactionary defensiveness within and now across modern literary studies. Self-conscious of the way in which the discipline has to some extent perpetuated political apathy within the corridors of its own

determinately “postmodern” cultural studies, it has needed a “turn to ethics” in order to renew a sense of its own purpose and agency. No longer a subdiscipline, ethical reading has saturated the market place to become the thematic mainstay of the interpretative frameworks in literary and cultural studies. With this trend there has been a remarkable publishing profligacy, as a wave of monographs, edited collections and anthologies have revisited literary history, reading “the ethical” into each period, movement, and genre.⁴

Yet Nussbaum’s model of the “narrative imagination” (2010, 95), and the role of empathy in the reading of literary fiction, can only take us so far in the pursuit of an ethics of literature. For in the play of the imagination a capacity for empathetic feeling is developed, but in projecting into the Other a human dignity, it is also a projection of the same – the same rhetorical, cognitive, and conceptual systems of thinking – the same paradigms and binaries of the present social realities. Indeed, the limitations of Nussbaum’s Aristotelian procedure are revealed by the very terms in which it is described. For example, she describes how a comparative assessment of “the major alternative views” – “holding them up, in each case, against our own experience and our intuitions” – can only imagine a “revise[d] overall picture so as to bring it into harmony with itself, preserving, as Aristotle says, ‘the greatest number and the most basic’ of the original judgments and perceptions” (1990, 174). In other words, Nussbaum’s ethics can only harmonize and accommodate different behaviors into the same moral order. Thus her claim falls down that “The procedure is holistic: it holds nothing unrevisable,” for she has to admit that it also “seeks for coherence and ‘fit’ in the system as a whole” (174). Where the individual is confronted with an alternative view or lifestyle that is so radically different as to require “improvising resourcefully in response to the new perceived thing”, ethical assessment must come down to the “discrimination” that Nussbaum’s Aristotle suggests “lies in perception” (182). However, Nussbaum here fails to recognize that the cognitive vision of such a “perception” is structured according to the ego’s

ontological mode of thinking; it does not challenge the ethical at the level of the structural grammar of its phenomenological form. The final “perceptive equilibrium” (182) that Nussbaum promotes is a bringing into alignment, or even (as for Booth) holding in contradiction, forms of behavior that fit with the ego’s structures of perception. In its most extreme form this mode of perception, intended as a positive ethical capability, legitimates acts of cognitive violence against the other – appropriating the other through knowledge of their difference into a predetermined moral order.

Nussbaum perhaps recognizes these limitations herself when she describes the need for “an unsteady oscillation between blindness and openness, exclusivity and general concern, fine reading of life and the immersion of love” (1990, 190). Indeed, exceeding the limits of Nussbaum’s ethics there is an *extra* interpretive or reflective obligation on the reader that is beyond the limits of the Aristotelian procedure (the novelist, Nussbaum concludes, cannot “have an intimate personal life and still see for us all” [190]). Here, at the limits of the permissible in her philosophical writing, Nussbaum is indebted to the much more recent philosophical thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). In particular, Nussbaum engages Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) as she works through several complex arguments in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986) and continues to refer to his philosophical thought throughout *Love’s Knowledge*. Indeed, in both *Love’s Knowledge* and *The Fragility of Goodness*, there is a residual desire, or ethical excess, that is beyond the scope of Classical philosophy. Nussbaum, less consciously than Wittgenstein, is also engaged in the larger project: a quest for truth to de-shackle ethics from the metaphysical or Platonic universals. As Wittgenstein writes in *The Blue and the Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the ‘Philosophical Investigations’* (1958):

The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term. (1958, 19-20)

Nussbaum shares this emphasis on “concrete cases” and thereby approaches a position on epistemology similar to Wittgenstein in which “the speaking of language is part of an activity or a form of life,” and where “essence is expressed in grammar” (1953, 23). Language is thus at the centre of Wittgenstein’s philosophical thinking because in his quest for truth “grammar tells what kind of object anything is.” (1953, 371) And yet, ultimately, Nussbaum uses Aristotle to draw a “circle of appearances” and thus predetermines the *way* of her ontological limits, or grammar, of “Being” (in her own terms, “the primacy of perceptive intuition” [1990, 141]).

Finally, Nussbaum’s ethics of reading nowhere allows for an altogether Other; rather, it looks for a reciprocity of the same humanism as she has it already proscribed. And yet to be truly responsible to our humanity, it is necessary to recognize that what is fundamentally at stake in the interhuman encounter is the possibility of personal transformation and a radical accountability. It is thus that Nussbaum’s ethics, and the popular neo-humanist approach, is limited to defense, criticism, and opposition, rather than enabling radical critique and systematic change. Indeed, for Wittgenstein too, it seemed finally impossible “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (1953, 309).

Whilst there has been some important historicist work in reading the ethical into literary history, the current populist neo-Aristotelianism threatens to wear out the thread of a more radically engaged ethical turn. Despite the many guides, introductions, and anthologies that have transformed this subdiscipline into a mainstream practice, the most serious attempt

to advance a post- Structuralist ethics is to be found in the critical monographs (published principally in the 1990s) by Simon Critchley (1992), Robert Eaglestone (1997), Jill Robbins (1999), and Derek Attridge (2004), as well as in the literary-philosophical collections edited by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (1991), Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford, and Tim Woods (1999), and Rainsford and Woods (1999). Pioneering an alternative cross-fertilization of literature and philosophy, these critics took up the challenge of re-examining the ethics of reading in the light of a philosophical re-orientation of ontology (that is being, or self-identity) and ethics. A foundational rethinking, it was developed through the work of the Lithuanian-born, French Talmudic-commentator and radical philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, and was intended to enable a renewed politico-ethical engagement for literary criticism, without resorting to an uncritical moral absolutism or, indeed, the reflective evaluations of a neo-Aristotelian, narrative ethics.

The ethical turn is made possible because of the fundamental difference at the heart of Levinas's work which is set apart from traditional philosophy and which presents the possibility to re-think the ethics of literature. Whilst Nussbaum claims that "the Aristotelian procedure begins with a very broad and inclusive question: "How should a human being live?" (1990, 25) Levinas inaugurates an altogether radically different conception of ethics. In fact, Levinas begins before the calculations of traditional moral philosophies – re-negotiating the virtues of Athenian culture with Plato's Idea of the Good, in contradistinction to the pure self of the Cartesian ego, the sociological implications of Darwin's natural selection, the systemic ethics of Kant's Utilitarianism, the reliance on the passion of the emotions in Hume, the self-interest in Nietzsche's will-to-power, taking even further the insistence on an ethical grounding second as it is to fundamental ontology in Heidegger's *Dasein* – Levinas begins with the very phenomenology which gives rise to human relations. In the daring and provocative *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas argues that the assignation

of responsibility is a passivity of support instantiated before the unique presence of an other's face. Here the radical alterity of their difference obligates an ethical relation prior to the construction of the ego. It is faced with another human being that oneself is called to speak out, a signification that embodies the logos, and ultimately supports the being of the other. This foundational, philosophical development is unfolded in his later mature work, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974). Crucially, in the re-orientation of ethics prior to ontology, Levinas's philosophy privileges language as inhering an ethical structure in a saying which brings neighbors into relation with each other.

Levinas's description of the ethical event as the "underlying intention of language" (1961, 73) is preferable to Nussbaum's "perceptive intuition" (1990, 141) because it more successfully secures a reliable grounding for ethics that is not bounded or totalizing but is nonetheless a call to moral responsibility. In the face-to-face encounter, Levinas explains that the ethical saying of language "accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limitrophe within this relation," and that the other, "despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same" (1961, 39). For Nussbaum too, ethics is an optics, but for Levinas "it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type" (1961, 24). The quest for truth in a Levinasian ethics is thus in opposition to the epistemology of Nussbaum's account, making its transcendental appeal in "the presence of infinity breaking the close circle of totality" (Levinas, 1961, 171). Levinas's focus on the other, rather than on individual well-being, does not help the argument for a narrative ethics: "the unnarratable other," Levinas concludes, "loses his face as a neighbor in narration" (1974, 166).

The consequences for literary criticism are profound; Levinas's reorientation of ethics and ontology provides a new phenomenology of the subject – a re-vision of subjectivity and deregulation of selfhood – that re-grounds the foundations of political critique. Working on

ethics during the 1960s and 1970s, Levinas had laid a parallel philosophical track alongside the explosive work of structuralism. Levinas's philosophy was well-placed historically. As Lee Morrissey writes, his "approach prioritizes whatever in the text resists assimilation to the same" (2001, 330), and so in its alignment with deconstruction's decentering practices it also attracted Derrida's critique. As Buell reminds us, "a good deal of the credit must go to Derrida for having called the attention of literary scholars to Levinas's work" (1999, 9). Derrida's long essay "Violence and Metaphysics" carefully engages Levinas's "ethics as first philosophy" questioning the end-point of alterity against what he calls "the finitude of meaning" (Derrida, 1978, 127). In fact, Derrida helps to re-commit a Levinasian ethics to its political and textual limits.

With this opening up of the ethical turn, differing interpretations of ethical philosophy have since advanced variations in its application to the practice of literary criticism. Indeed, in 2004 Derek Attridge argued in *The Singularity of Literature* that "there is an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification" (130) and commentators have recognized that "the ethical turn in critical theory," as Tyler Bradway put forward at the 2010 convention of the Northeastern Modern Language Association, "has inspired a reevaluation of literature's capacities to catalyze ethical problematics." As Carla Serpell summarizes, "Literature is structurally suggestive: it affords certain ways of reading" (2008, iii), and these movements of reading – a projection onto, or movement into the self/other relation – are its ethical modes. Indeed, any poststructuralist ethics must now allow for the multi-dimensionality of the textual encounter. Whilst Nussbaum's ethics of reading supports a realist fiction popular in the nineteenth century it has been the mission of creative experimentations of narratology and literary form to open up the precincts of language and to challenge the reader to embrace more radical subjectivities. In the spaces of alternative reader-relations created by

experimental poetics and innovations of prosody, for instance, ethical criticism can interpret the proleptic spaces for new relations of the social body.⁵

This is the promise of what Buell calls the “new ethical criticism” and it is recharged in the current need to defend the humanities. As Buell explains, reading becomes an act of “conscienceful listening” (1999, 12); for Robert Eaglestone, writing in *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (1997), “the ‘saying’ in literature is precisely that uncanny moment when... our relation to the logos is interrupted (175). Indeed, following Levinas, as the sign achieves its signification so too the commitment of an approach becomes already committed to the sum of its readings. As a saying, “distinct from the said” – an “interpretation as interruption” (Eaglestone 1997, 165) – ethical criticism ultimately serves the task of breaking through sedimented codifications. And yet questions of definition, of course, always persist. Whilst Tobin Siebers has focused on community, Derrida on textuality, Foucault on the socio-political, and Levinas on the Other, Nussbaum’s “cognitive-evaluative” (2001, 3) conception of ethics (extended in her recent work on the emotions) positions “fancy” – the “ability to see one thing as another and one thing in another” – “at the heart of the ethical life” (1998, 349). Nussbaum foregrounds the work of “projection,” but it is a hermeneutics not dissimilar to the totalizing western rationalisations that Levinas critiques, for “difference” in her accounts is based on “social circumstances” rather than any innate singularity (349). Nussbaum writes, “participants look not for a view that is true by correspondence to some extra-human reality, but for the best overall fit between a view and what is deepest in human lives” (1990, 26). This fanciful “projection” marks a fundamental line of departure between Nussbaum and Levinas. For Levinas, ethics is other-oriented (the Other ruptures the self-same as the originary imperative of the ethical) whereas for Nussbaum, ethics begins and is ordered according to the self (the individual subject is autonomous). “Emotions focus on our

own goals,” Nussbaum writes, “they represent the world from the point of view of those goals and projects” (2001, 7).

Conclusion: Towards a Textual Ethics for the Twenty-First Century

Throughout human cultural history the question of ethics has remained insistent: it has preoccupied our best writers, it is seen throughout the changing practices of literary criticism, and it registers in the adapting forms of literary studies. To save ethics in the meta-language of literary criticism is not to advocate an evangelical fundamentalism or doctrinal moral absolutism, but rather to suggest that literary criticism can thicken or “rough-up” the rarefied aesthetic pleasures of the sublime by intellectually engaging in the fullest relation in the axiom of the reader-text-world, that is, between representations of the self, other, and their subjectification (or socialization) within – to use a Marxist vocabulary – the political economy of the text and its conditions of production. Thus in a book “chart[ing] the course of criticism into the 1990’s and beyond,” Ralph Cohen suggests that above all else literary theory can and ought to be “a personal and public commitment to ethical and literary values” (1989, xx). Indeed, the ambitions towards an expanded definition of textual meaning as an ethical stance of political engagement is already evident in Rita Felski’s question as the current editor of *New Literary History*: “How can we do justice to both their [artworks’] singularity and their worldliness?” (2011, 576). Whilst the mirror alignment of subjectivities afforded by the realist structure of mimesis tends to limit our reading practices within the parameters of ontological, identity thinking, other structural experimentations of narratology and semiotics will on occasions push through the limits of moral reasoning into new relations of community. Felski recognizes that “texts are objects that do a lot of travelling”; their textual meaning is in part defined across “transtemporal connection[s] and comparison” (580). Literature’s ethical imperative may find its political force for a “text’s sociability... is

not an attrition, diminution, or co-option of its agency, but the very precondition of it” (589). It is only in expanding our notion of textual meaning – attentive to its material witness as much as to the form and force of its argument – that the ethical dimensions of the literary text are approached; for bodies touch in the thinking of intersubjectivity, a human relation with attendant ethical responsibilities. We need, in short, an attentiveness to form, to aesthetics, as witness within the socialization (context). It is thus that the experimental work of literature and the commitment of literary criticism work towards the futurity of the proleptic, to new forms of community and social possibility.

The departments of literature that turned to the philosophy represented by “academic postmodernism,” were in Nussbaum’s estimation in 2009, “no help to the movement Ralph encouraged us to start.” Indeed, Ralph’s “countercultural vision,” she has suggested, “has not been fully realized” (764). Whilst Nussbaum mourns the neglect of the moral philosophers John Rawls, Bernard Williams, and John McDowell, the contributions of Levinasian ethical critics are similarly written out in the dominant trend of neo-Aristotelian, narrative ethics. As David Davies and Carl Matheson observe in *Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Literature: An Analytic Approach* (2008), “there has been lamentably little critical engagement of this sort between the different philosophical traditions” (xvi). The work of ethics, however, always compels us to a mutual engagement and Nussbaum and Levinas both necessarily deal with the foundational and troubling question posed by the face-to-face experience. “We see personlike shapes all around us,” Nussbaum writes, “but how do we relate to them?” (1998, 349) Indeed, it is at the epistemological limits of her thought that Nussbaum shares in a wonder of the ethical saying, that primordial phenomenon of the other’s alterity in language as it is described by Levinas. She notes, for instance, “the physical texture of language, teasing and caressing the reader” (1995, 40). In a Levinasian literary ethics the “textual encounter” is, as Buell has observed, a “personal encounter”

(1999, 13), and the rosette or love-knot of phenomenological exegesis (to which Levinas's writing aspires) is, perhaps, that physical quality of language described by Nussbaum as a "flexible and acrobatic circus body" (1995, 40).

Levinas's thesis is an emancipatory activism in phenomenological thought and yet it is presently unfashionable and largely marginalized within the current trend of ethical criticism. Fearful perhaps that its more difficult thinking would only further trouble the embattled subjectivity – already up against its own self-critical skepticism – the critic writing in the post-millennial era has typically found other more comfortable modes of engagement or favored the displacement activity of a surface rhetoric of literary aesthetics.⁶ Yet Levinas's work revised the Western philosophical tradition to put a responsibility for the other before the freedom of the subject and the challenge today is to break through polarized ethical philosophies and competing critical camps. As Nancy Glazener observes of the rift between Analytic and Continental philosophy, what is required is "an event which would not be the triumph of either but the possibility of something new" (2005, 51).

Following Levinas's "ethics as first philosophy" (1989, 75), literary criticism is a work that must fracture the sedimented narratives of literary and cultural history to bring a renewed attentiveness or ethical witness in dialectic with the subject-positioning of a said text. Attending to the ethical potential rather than the social purpose of literature it may counter-balance what Drew Milne observes: "temptations either to put too much emphasis on historical and intellectual contexts, or to develop too quickly into theoretical formalism or conceptual abstraction" (2010, 33). Indeed, ethical criticism needs to extend Levinas's account of the phenomenology of the face-to-face experience in language in order to understand reading as a textual encounter (the structural relation between self and other) and thus the basis by which aesthetics *is* ethics. At the same time, ethical criticism can draw on Nussbaum's Aristotelian approach in order to allow for an evaluation of the imagined forms

of the face-to-face encounter, where ethics also is a public responsibility to the said text (as Levinas writes, “Truth takes form in this response to a summons” [1961, 244]). Any reading that takes forward an ethical imperative must be attentive both to the singularity of textual aesthetics (its transformative or affective capacities) and to the politics of its social or historical context. Whilst their philosophical rationale differs, the possibility for a shared ethics emerges in Nussbaum’s attempt to “imagine language as a way of touching a human body” (1995, 41). Here interdisciplinary literary studies can begin again towards a textual ethics for the twenty-first century, and recommit a literary criticism that is altogether different from the rhetorical language of a disinterested aestheticism for it must be first of all attendant to its ethical responsibilities. Indeed, despite his transcendental appeal, both Nussbaum and Levinas started this vital work towards an ethics which is material and this-worldly, “restoring our love and attention,” as Nussbaum writes, “to the phenomena of daily life” (2001, 15).

¹ With a view to civic responsibility, Nussbaum’s “Aristotelian procedure” provides four qualities for “readership”: fancy, the imaginative capacity which constructs and projects humanity onto another; sympathy, a compassion for the suffering of others and a joy in their well-being; autonomy, viewing the other as having a separate and single life; and, judicious spectatorship, the evaluative deliberations essential to critique (1995, 76).

² In her review of Booth’s *The Company We Keep*, Nussbaum simply refutes the literality of his claim by explaining, “I can treat a book as I would never think it right to treat a real live person” (1989, 176).

³ Three points in particular retain their acuity: first, Posner argues that “the novel is certainly a more bourgeois medium” than Nussbaum allows (and, indeed, one need only look to the

formation of a canon for conclusive evidence); second, that “immersion in literature does not make us better citizens” (an almost impossible assertion to prove); and, third, that Nussbaum’s discrimination of literary merit threatens “lists of edifying works of literature” (though Posner also risks a partisan elitism). Elsewhere in the debate there is much confusion – including recognition on both sides that once again what is most at variance is the definition of terms – as well as occasional inadvertent agreements. In the exchange, for instance, Posner suggests that “the aesthetic outlook *is* a moral outlook,” and that “literature helps us make sense of our lives, helps us to fashion an identity for ourselves” (1997, 7).

⁴ To name just a few notable recent contributions include, for example, Edwin Craun, *Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing* (2010); Andrew Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2008); Jil Larson, *Ethics and Narrative in the English Novel, 1880-1914* (2001; 2009); Jeffrey Karnicky, *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture* (2007).

⁵ The formal experimentation of literary production thus emerges as an ethical imperative; in the discourse of modern poetics, “in order to live not solipsistically, but interestedly” as the poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it, and to “instantiate a distance from regular poetic practice and its subjectivities... as in exile from these” (2010, n.p.).

⁶ In “Close but not deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” Heather Love describes a shift from what she calls a “depth hermeneutics” to the “description of surfaces” (2010, 375).

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