Thomas Claviez. *Aesthetics and Ethics: Otherness and Moral Imagination from Aristotle to Levinas and from Uncle Tom’s Cabin to House Made of Dawn.*

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REFERENCES


Unlike other fields of organized study that have originated in the last three decades, such as the Law and Literature movement, the intersection of ethics and literature dates back to Plato’s The Republic and Aristotle’s Poetics. Although until recently, ethics and literature were distanced and autonomous academic fields, they have exhibited strong ties throughout human history. Literature reflects common cultural and moral values and illuminates complex and hidden moral aspects of human experience, while at the same time, “a less amorphous phenomenon than art,”¹ it bridges the gap between abstract literary imagination and specific moral principles, between the creative resistance to reductionism and the desire to subsume human experience under normative frames. Moreover, literature takes up the task of exhibiting and narrating the great debates and contradictions of human morality to a wider and more insightful extent than philosophy, at risk of turning into a vast laboratory for thought experiments conducted by philosophers of ethics, an entrenched area where actions and decisions by emblematic literary heroes and paradigmatic plot twists are reduced to oversimplified examples of certain moral stances and/or arguments. Peter Lamarque has pointed out the danger of utilizing literature for philosophical reasons: “by trying to assimilate literature into philosophy, the features that make literature distinct will become diluted.”²
In his remarkable book, Thomas Claviez proposes a reading of four classic American novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Herman Melville’s «Billy Budd», Sailor, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, that takes their “exemplary” character seriously. “Any reading that strives to exemplify a moral theory or philosophy with the help of a literary example runs the risk that any particular literary example will deny its model-function for any theoretical paradigm – even if this paradigm is based on literature’s capability to particularize” (237). In his attempt to thread these novels on a theoretical frame that would avoid their analysis as if they were exemplifications of moral theories, Claviez reads the novels “as constituting a different discursive regime that addresses some of the same problems that ethics or moral philosophy have as their subject” (xxv). The novels were chosen according to several criteria such as their “generic and historical breadth,” “ethical and historical relevance.” The moral approaches that are delineated in *Aesthetics & Ethics* stretch from the poststructuralist views of J. Hillis Miller and Jean-François Lyotard, both heavily influenced by the ideas of Immanuel Kant, to the variant neo-Aristotelian approaches offered by Alasdair McIntyre and Martha Nussbaum as well as the concepts of otherness as developed by Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur.

The book is divided into four parts; however, Parts I, II, III can be read as one large part which addresses the theoretical presuppositions upon which the four novels will be discussed in the last part of the book. The notion of Kantian universality and its remnants that have permeated the poststructuralist views of J. Hillis Miller and Jean-François Lyotard are thoroughly discussed in the first part. The author argues that there is a paradox, a contradiction between the Kantian idea that moral conclusions cannot be derived from examples and the persistent use of the example by moral philosophers to illustrate their points. Part II emphasizes the differences between Martha Nussbaum’s and Alasdair McIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian approaches. Whereas McIntyre’s attack against modern liberal societies is undermined, according to Claviez, by the utopian, anachronistic concept of homogeneous, rationally and morally united and economically unambitious *polis*, upon which Aristotle’s virtue ethics is based, and his insistence to take the historical context of Aristotelian philosophy into account and apply it to our modern times, even to small groups or communities (64), Nussbaum’s theses about literary identification, empathy in particular, are equally problematic, as they eradicate all otherness. If I as a spectator “put myself in the situation of the other,” if “I presume that the other feels the same that I would feel in a comparable situation, that s/he perceives in a similar manner the same incidents I would perceive,” then the particular loses its particularity, since as far as I and s/he feels, we are indistinguishable (108). In Nussbaum’s theory the particular is subsumed under the universal and loses its tragedy (110). However, both Nussbaum’s and McIntyre’s approaches share the mutual belief that “if the particular is stripped of its otherness, [it] threatens to be subsumed under (and dissolved in) what could paradoxically be [sic] termed a ‘universal concept of particularity’” (111). The failure of Nussbaum and McIntyre to embrace and incorporate otherness into their ethico-philosophical systems, leads Claviez to focus on Emmanuel Levinas’ radicalized philosophy of otherness and to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of a “narrative ethics,” a highly ambitious attempt to merge a teleological Aristotelianism with a Kantian moral philosophy and a Levinasian ethics. Thus in Part III and in line with Kantian ethics, Levinasian ethics is suspicious of the relationship between literature and the emotions in the realm of moral philosophy, of the mythic and affective aspects of art in general. Furthermore,
Levinas is suspicious of the stasis of the artistic image and of the fact that it hides this very stasis behind images of lifelikeness, and, particularly in literature, “a narrative temporality that makes one forget the “false” character of its verisimilitude and the “faked” quality of its diachronicity” (151). According to Levinas, there are no ethical stances in literature; narratives are not ethical at all. Literature cannot illuminate the encounter with the Other. This belief is in stark contrast to Ricoeur’s claim that there are no ethically neutral narratives. According to Ricoeur, “any ethical quality of literature depends on whether it can have impact on life; that is, it has the power to refigure life” (192). Claviez’s attempt to fuse the asymmetrical concept of Levinas’ radical otherness with Ricoeur’s concept of narrative unity that reflects the aforementioned ethico-philosophical views is certainly a difficult and risky undertaking, although the author is well aware of the risk since the narrative unity of the good life, a concept partially informed by Aristotelian virtue ethics, is one that excludes otherness, thus is at odds with Levinas’ ethics of the Other. A seemingly unresolvable problem, indeed: “how...the ethically challenged concept of the sameness of selfhood (Levinas) is negotiated with the autonomy of a self constituted by shifting constellations between idem and ipse (Ricoeur), depends upon and changes with, the generic characteristics of the respective work” (229). The generic characteristics of the four novels and their intersection with historico-political context, aesthetics and, of course, ethical outlooks, is the plastic, complex framework within which Claviez offers his insightful interpretations of the moral conundrums that emerge.

4 Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is one of the most controversial novels of the 19th century, a best-selling novel since the day of its publication, which was later rejected by James Baldwin, a book that suffers from its excessive sentimentality and its melodramatic improbability. “Uncle Tomism” is a target for many black scholars, as a result of Stowe’s attempt to establish Uncle Tom as both a political and a moral character without having sufficiently separated the two. These spheres are precariously incompatible, argues Claviez, and Stowe seems to be unaware of their incompatibility while she is trying, in vain, to humanize an ethics of sacrifice. If we attempt to read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* within Nussbaum’s paradigm, we will realize that, given the fact that Uncle Tom serves as a model, an example, and a synecdoche for the experience of Southern slavery as well as the embodiment of Stowe’s idealistic positions, the prospective emphatic identification with the protagonist is at least questionable.

5 Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor* –begun in 1888, left unfinished at his death in 1891 and published posthumously in 1924–, is not a typical realistic novel in the vein of the 19th century novel, the type of novel Nussbaum uses as a model for her analysis. Although the homonymous protagonist, a seaman who is very popular with the crew of the *Bellipotent* and who, as it turns out, becomes an innocent victim of a rather complicated legal case, can evoke the reader’s sympathy, this sympathy cannot enable empathy. Billy is a one-dimensional hero, an allegory, and as such, he is a type rather than a particular (301); his one-dimensionality obstructs empathy. In addition, as an author Herman Melville doesn’t fit the “Jamesian artist” that Nussbaum has in mind, the artist who “does not feel free to create just anything: he imagines himself as straining to get it right, not to miss anything, to be keen rather than obtuse.” An author is obliged to convey the rightness of a certain action, according to Nussbaum, because any change of description affects the moral quality of the action. But how can an Aristotelian concept like *phronesis* apply in a case of emergency as the one that
Captain Vere sees himself pushed into, asks Claviez, since Melville does not offer the reader any reference to a civil society in which a judgment may take into account the ambiguity that any case implies? It seems as if Melville “has reduced his characters to the clear-cut silhouettes that War itself demands. And in war, the mean – so central to an Aristotelian ethics – is non-existent” (302). Nussbaum’s ethical approach is critical of modernism and based upon the belief that the restoration of ethic is possible only in the case of pre-modern societies and ethics. When it comes to analyzing the great works of modernist literature, such as *Billy Budd, Sailor*, a work in which any emphatic identification with the protagonist is obstructed, the exemplary function in Nussbaum’s approach becomes problematic.

The parallels between *Billy Budd* and Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, are striking. Both heroes are not too particularly intelligent and behave like instinctual animals; both are struggling to discuss their feelings and to find the right words to fully express themselves and, as a consequence, they use violence to make up for their lacking recourses of vocal expression; both are sacrificed by a society that wants to uphold order and defend itself against what it perceives as threatening irrational impulses (341). However, *Native Son*, unlike *Billy Budd*, is, according to Claviez, a “narrative about the lack of narrative identity,” thus it doesn’t offer an ethical subject that could serve the didactic, exemplary function than an Aristotelian approach ascribes to literature. Bigger, a young black American who lived in humiliating poverty before committing two atrocious murders, cannot be such an example, because he belongs neither to the Black nor to the White system of practises, because he appears monstrous to both his own and the White community (364). Claviez detects a transformation of a Kantian into a Levinasian sublime developing in Bigger’s powerful encounter with Jan Erlorn in his cell. Erlorn is Mary’s – the first victim of Bigger - lover, a kind-hearted idealistic young man who strives to surpass his suffering over Mary’s murder. Erlorn’s belief in equality and in Bigger’s innocence, as he attributes the murder the later committed to the unjust economic and social conditions of his upbringing, make him offer Bigger legal support by introducing him to Boris Max, a lawyer from the Communist Party. Most importantly, he enables Bigger to recognize the humanity of a white person. The moment Erlorn has acquired a face, a fundamental element in Levinasian ethics, since it is the face of the Other which resists me by its opposition and imposes upon me the order “Thou shalt not kill!”, the threatening otherness of whiteness –the “deforming mask”– is snatched from his face to become what Claviez calls the “sublime Other” below his white face (377).

The last novel analyzed in the book, *House Made of Dawn* by Scott N. Momaday, was the most difficult for Claviez to discuss within the theoretical frame he has set up so far. A Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *House Made of Dawn* oscillates between the rational, pragmatic Western society and the animistic, spiritual world of the Native American tradition. Abel, the main protagonist of the novel, is a character that represents the hybrid nature of the book, at first detached from his native tradition due to his participation in World War II, then slowly reconnecting to a world of myths and values upon his return to New Mexico. It is this very attempt to re-adapt to that world that poses limitations for a concrete analysis, either Aristotelian or under the prism of Levinasian ethics or Ricoeur’s philosophy of narrative identity. Claviez examines thoroughly in this last chapter of Part IV how the novel’s mythic, folkloristic character...
works both against Ricoeur’s narrative ethics and Levinas’ concept of radical Otherness.

One might hold some reservations regarding the selected novels presented in this volume. The naive didacticism and literary flaws of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* make the novel seem anachronistic; it is no coincidence that today it appears more on recommended reading lists for children and teenagers than for adults. *Billy Budd, Sailor* is a great novella, but it is nevertheless unfinished; Melville’s ultimate intention for the plot remains unknown. In addition, *Native Son* fails in comparison to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, a novel that escapes the pitfalls of protest and genre isolationism. And as for the *House Made of Dawn*, its transcendental character is a form of resistance to any solid analysis, either from an ethical or generally philosophical standpoint. However, through his spirited confrontations with major thinkers like Nussbaum, McIntyre, Ricoeur and Levinas, Claviez provides insightful answers to complex moral conundrums and at the same time explores and highlights literature’s openness to a wide range of modern ethico-philosophical interpretations. *Aesthetics & Ethics* is a notable read that will appeal not only to scholars with an interest in the field of Ethics and Literature but to all those interested in the current status of literary theory and/or moral philosophy.

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4. Vere insists that a drum-head court be assembled and intervenes in the deliberations of the court-martial panel to advice them to convict Billy for the murder of John Craggart, despite his belief in Billy’s innocence, because he is afraid that mutiny threatens *Bellipotent* if the case is not dealt with swiftly.

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