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Autor: Schweighauser, Philipp / Askin, Ridvan
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Introduction

How should one address the nexus between literature, ethics, and morality? In order to do so, it seems, one would have to start out by defining all the terms in this enumeration – "literature," "ethics," and "morality" – and then determine the prevailing relations between them. This would entail addressing the significant amount of research on this very nexus that has been produced over the last three-and-a-half decades or so, with at least two if not even three or four "ethical turns" postulated in literary studies since the beginning of the 1980s:[1] from the Habermas-Lyotard debate about the desirability of the postmodern farewell to the grand narratives of modernity sparked by Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979)[2] to Jacques Derrida's and fellow post-structuralists' engagement with Emmanuel Levinas' reflections on the relations between the self and the Other (which reaches back to Derrida's chapter on Levinas in his 1967 book *Writing and Difference* but assumed a new urgency in the 1980s and 1990s),[3] to Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian defense of literature as ethical education in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), to Paul Ricœur's phenomenological-hermeneutic intervention that sees narrative as the primary means of understanding and relaying human experience

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[1] Suggested dates for such ethical turns are 1983 with the appearance of a special issue of *New Literary History* on the topic, 1987 with the (in)famous De Man case, and the beginning of the 1990s, which saw a significant rise in academic output regarding the issue. For good accounts of various ethical turns, see Vlacos, Heinze, Eskin, Davis and Womack, Buell, and Parker.

[2] See also Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (originally published in 1983) and Habermas's "Modernity – An Incomplete Project" and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, originally published in 1980 and 1985 respectively.

[3] See Baker.

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and life elaborated in the three volumes of his *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988) and in his late magnum opus *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), to Jacques Rancière's return to the nexus between ethics and aesthetics (which already occupied Wittgenstein) – and the relation of both to politics – in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004). As if this were not enough, how should one address this nexus from specifically American Studies perspectives? What is it that American Studies has to offer here, particularly if one takes into account the plural in perspectives that insists on a multiplicity of approaches? Where and how should one begin?

Rather than delving directly into the pertinent scholarly debates referenced above in an attempt to enumerate, differentiate, evaluate, and thus map the many different trajectories this scholarship has engendered – a daunting task indeed –, we reminded ourselves where our real expertise lies and decided to begin with the first term of our enumeration, literature, and with one of world literature's most famous beginnings: "Call me Ishmael" (18). As everyone knows, this is not quite the beginning of *Moby-Dick*. The novel starts with etymological reflections on the origin and development of the word "whale" (7) and traces it in several languages. This is followed by the extracts – 79 quotations concerning whales that are mainly from the realms of literature, science, and religion (8-17). But then the narrative proper begins, with that famous first sentence: "Call me Ishmael" (18).

If we follow Levinas and Derrida in conceiving of ethics – and with this, we now also invoke the second of our three terms – as revolving around a relation between the self and the Other, as revolving around the immense responsibilities the self has toward the Other, then Melville's first sentence takes us right to the heart of the ethical. For what the Hebrew name Ishmael means is: "God hears" or "God has listened" (Knauf 93). Thus, the name of Melville's narrator already gestures toward one of the most crucial relations between the self and the Other – the relation between the human and the radical alterity of the divine.

Yet there is more to Ishmael's name than that. The Biblical Ishmael is an outcast of a great family, the son of the patriarch Abraham and Hagar, his barren wife Sarah's Egyptian maid.[4] Driven away from Abraham's household by Sarah's jealousy, Ishmael fathers a plurality of desert tribes collectively known as the Ishmaelites, "a large confederation

[4] Melville culled his knowledge of Biblical figures and stories from several King James Bibles. A large family Bible published by E. H. Butler in 1846 was Melville's most important source during the writing of *Moby-Dick* (Pardes 13).

of major north Arabian bedouin [sic] tribes" (Knauf 93). Traditionally, Ishmael is "identified as the ancestor of the Arabs" (*Moby-Dick* 18n2). Melville's choice of name, then, is entirely appropriate not only because his novel brings together a cast of outcasts – seafaring men cut off from their families – but also because this narrator has a special relation to non-Western cultures. It is thus that we arrive at another ethical relation, another kind of relation between the self and the other. Ishmael's name prepares us for a narrative that by and large gives us highly sympathetic representations of ethnic others: from the loving relationship between Ishmael and the South Sea cannibal Queequeg to the sentimental figure of the black boy Pip – the one character that allows Ahab to show his humanity. Of course, Melville's presentations of ethnic others are not without their ethical quandaries: Melville digs deep into primitivist discourses – be it those revolving around noble savages such as Queequeg or those revolving around satanic savages such as Fedallah. The novel's first sentence, then, not only prepares us for a narrative that thematizes the ethical relation of the self to a radical, incommensurable Other, be it God or Emersonian Nature; it also invites us to probe the special ethical obligations obtaining between the members of a multiethnic seafaring community. In other words, what "Call me Ishmael" announces is a novel that explores both a Levinasian ethics of radical alterity (most palpably in Starbuck's firm belief in God, Ahab's ungodly hubris, and his as well as Ishmael's desire to become one with a transcendent Nature that in this novel appears in the guise of the sea) and a Habermasian ethics of communication in the public sphere (which is at work between the Anglo-Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, "Orientals," and South Sea Islander that populate the Pequod).

If we follow Habermas in glossing ethics as the theory of the good life and morality as a guide to right conduct (Habermas, *Facts and Norms* 154 passim), then the move from self-Other relations to self-others relations is also a move into the realm of our third term: morality. This is the realm where the conscience of individuals, the use of practical reason, and the rules that govern relations between human beings are at stake. Again, we find that *Moby-Dick* provides a fertile ground of inquiry. In the novel's moral universe, it is first and foremost the friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg, which is guided by love, kindness, and mutual respect, that serves as a model for good conduct. Other characters' actions, too, serve as guides to morally sound behavior. Consider Starbuck's most famous rebuke to Ahab: "'Vengeance on a dumb brute!' cried Starbuck, 'that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blas-

phemous'" (139). Of course, the first mate's censure of the ship's captain is primarily religious in nature – the charge is blasphemy – but it is also an act of moral courage in which one living being dares to challenge the hierarchy of the ship as he intervenes on behalf of another living being. At the other end of the moral spectrum, we find Ahab, who manipulates and abuses his crew and refuses to provide assistance to the captain of the Rachel, whose son is lost at sea: "Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good-bye, good-bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go" (398). Ahab shows a keen awareness of his moral obligations toward another father but he consciously rejects them and decides to act immorally. Notice Ahab's careful wording: for this monomaniac, sinisterly self-reliant man, ethical relations between the human and the divine obtain only between Captain Gardiner and God ("God bless ye, man") while he himself dispenses with a divine third that could intervene between the inner law of his conscience, which he decides to violate, and the bereft father's moral demand ("may I forgive myself"). This scene is also crucial in the novel's moral universe because it powerfully evokes what Joanne Dobson calls the "emotional and philosophical ethos" of sentimentalism – an ethos that "celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss" (266) – to expose the cruelty of a character who rejects the claims of sympathy. While much of *Moby-Dick*'s modernity stems from its refusal to follow contemporaneous sentimental-domestic writers, who continue to subordinate the right to fiction to religion and morality, it does not cut all ties with that tradition. In exploring the morality and immorality of its characters' actions, Melville's novel does participate in what Nussbaum calls ethical education, though without the overt didactic intent of, say, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), two best-selling sentimental novels published in the same decade as *Moby-Dick*.

Returning once more to the first sentence of *Moby-Dick* moves yet another ethical relation into view. Looking at these famous three words closely, we may begin to wonder whether the figure we encounter is a straight shooter or is playing games with us. After all, the narrator does not say: "Hi, I'm Ishmael." Instead, he says "Call me Ishmael." And we begin to wonder: is this really his name? Or is this just what he tells us to call him? The ethical relation that such questions address is that between the teller, the tale, and those to whom the tale is told: the ethics of narration. On one level, this concerns the classic question of the narrator's reliability, a question that is raised particularly prominently in

first-person narration: from the high reliability of Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories to the infinitely eloquent manipulative evil of Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). *Moby-Dick*'s initial sentence raises this question of the narrator's reliability head-on, in connection with a core attribute of human identity: Ishmael's name. By the time we learn about his "spleen" and "hypos" (18) in the novel's first paragraph, we are bound to wonder how reliable Ishmael is, both as a sailor and as the teller of the tale. On another level, the ethics of narration concern the very use of telling stories itself. In this vein, Ricœur not only famously theorized narrative as that human capacity which makes it possible to synthesize experience, which is always inscribed in a horizon of temporality, in the first place (*Time* passim), but, due to its power of temporal synthesis, also as fundamental for both human memory and history (*Memory* passim). Narrative thus becomes the primary means of synthesizing *and* of relaying experience, equally important to understanding and grasping on the level of the subject as well as that of intersubjectivity, that is, that of the individual as well as that of community. Ricœur's ethical imperative accordingly reads "dare to give an account yourself!" (*Memory* 449). This injunction is complemented with the injunction to listen attentively. Telling, making one's experience intelligible to oneself and to others, and listening, being open to receiving such stories, thus form the capstones of Ricœur's ethics of narration, which is a genuine narrative ethics: narration becomes *the* ethical relation. It is in this context that one additional observation concerning *Moby-Dick*'s famous beginning is in order. "Call me Ishmael" comes across as quite a colloquial – and quite an American kind of first sentence. Think of other American novels that have this colloquial tone: from John Neal's 1817 text *Keep Cool* to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), to *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) – and beyond. In line with such texts, what the beginning of *Moby-Dick* immediately establishes is an easy familiarity between the narrator and the reader. Ricœur's injunction to listen attentively thus brings us to the final ethical conundrum under consideration here: not just that between listener and teller, narratee and narrator, but also that between readers and the very texts they read.

How can we do justice to a text as voluminous, encyclopedic, and playful as *Moby-Dick*? Already Theodor W. Adorno's utopian vision of the reconciliation of subject and object insisted on the primacy of the object in ways that remind readers of literature of their ethical obligation to do justice to the objects at hand ("Subject and Object"). Yet it is J. Hillis Miller who most consistently explores what he calls "the ethics of reading." In probing readers' responsibility – a key word in ethical de-

bates since Levinas – toward the texts they read, Miller focuses on "that aspect of the act of reading in which there is a response to the text that is both necessitated in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response" (43). Miller here reconceptualizes the hermeneutic act of interpretation in terms of an ethics of almost infinite responsibility toward the literary text. Whether we are prepared to follow this deconstructive version of New Critical injunctions or not, Miller certainly reminds us of our *own* responsibilities toward the texts we read and teach – our own responsibilities as readers, literary scholars, and teachers. This is certainly something that most readers of the present volume have at one point or another grappled with: how to do justice to *literary* texts – texts that more often than not refuse to be assimilated to the languages we already have for speaking and thinking about the world. What, then, constitutes an ethically sound relationship between us and the literary texts we read?

The relation of the self to the Other/other, whether divine, natural, human, or literary, and its literary representation; the questions of practical reason and right conduct and their literary negotiation; and the possibility that narration, or literature more generally, might be the primary mode of expression of the ethical relation and of practical reason: these, then, are the coordinates which determine the nexus between literature, ethics, and morality. And it is the space determined by these coordinates that the contributions to this volume navigate while inscribing a decidedly American Studies perspective, be it by taking US and Canadian works of literature as their tutor texts and objects of inquiry, or by approaching their material through theoretical and methodological lenses predominantly in use in or fashioned by American scholarly discourses – or by combining these two foci.

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This volume is organized into three complementary sections that focus on "Self," "Community," and "Environment." Reminiscent of Félix Guattari's "three ecological registers" of "environment, social relations and human subjectivity" (19-20), which are intended to provide a comprehensive map of the contemporary realm of "social and individual practices" (28), our three sections are not to be taken as delineating strictly distinct realms or fields of inquiry. Rather, they provide different "points of view": "It is quite wrong to make a distinction between ac-

tion on the psyche, the socius and the environment" (28), Guattari writes. Accordingly, even though they emphasize the respective perspective, none of the essays can be fully reduced to the thematic section to which they have been allocated. In what follows, we provide a brief guide to these sections and the individual contributions they consist of.

In accordance with the Guattarian insistence on the inseparability of the three ecologies of individual and social practices, Tea Jankovic, in the volume's first essay, which is also the first essay in the section devoted to the notion of the "Self," tackles head on from a Wittgensteinian perspective the crucial relation between subjectivity and aesthetic representations of subjectivity as they negotiate the subject's ethical relation to the world. Ultimately, she argues, art in general and literature in particular enable us to reflect on ourselves and on our relation to others in ways that are not available outside aesthetic experience. In Jankovic's account, our encounters with literature help us live the good life as they invite us to adopt a non-coercive and intersubjective perspective on the world.

Sämi Ludwig's contribution is concerned with the very same conundrum but from a different perspective. Availing himself of the American pragmatist tradition, particularly the thought of William James, and focusing on two novels by William Dean Howells and Henry James – *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Portrait of a Lady* –, Ludwig inquires into the representational practices of literary realism, which he finds engaged in a decidedly pragmatist project of tracing the groundedness of representation in experience, the very reality that constitutes subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Thomas Austenfeld, in turn, is less concerned with how the self relates to the world and more with how it relates to itself as he traces the *Dolphin* controversy pitting Robert Lowell as a repentant Catholic who, with the publication of *The Dolphin*, publicly confesses his guilt, thus shedding new light on a pivotal moment in the history of confessional poetry that has garnered much critical attention. In sharp distinction from earlier critics, Austenfeld's "Catholic" reading argues that the *Dolphin* controversy revolves precisely not around shame but around guilt.

In the contribution that concludes the section on the "Self," Dustin Breitenwischer explores how the indeterminate ending of Henry James's *What Maisy Knew* opens up a space of wonder in the reader's own aesthetic experience and hermeneutic endeavor. Drawing on reception aesthetics and Clemens Lugowski's theory of narrative motivation, Breitenwischer argues that James's novel is not motivated by the representation of characters' psychological depths but, by means of deliberately

avoiding to answer its titular question, rather initiates a readerly process of reflection on the relation between knowledge and the self. By representing the conundrum of representation as essentially open and opaque – unanswered –, the novel clears a space for and presents an ethical injunction in favor of infinite inquiry.

The section on "Community" begins with Noëlle McAfee's elaboration on the very possibility of a radical politics and political action. In order even to envision such a politics and such acting, she argues, one must first engage in radical self-questioning. Bringing together the thought of Julia Kristeva and Hannah Arendt, McAfee suggests that psychoanalysis furnishes the conditions for radical action, that the inner revolt of the psyche needs to precede and complement any outer revolt in the realm of the polis.

The subsequent essay by Michael Festl takes up one of the most crucial questions of any polis, namely that of justice. Distancing himself from Rawlsian ideal accounts of justice, Festl proposes a new version of justice theory that does justice to the particular and concrete. To this end, he turns to literature as literary works present acute representations of such particularities and thick descriptions of concrete sufferings and injustices and thus put the very concrete problems of justice into relief.

Granting the effectivity of literary works in providing such thick descriptions and in dramatizing injustices, Winfried Fluck probes further to ask: apart from describing ethical and moral quandaries, can literary works also provide formulations of genuine ethical principles? In a veritable tour de force through the last three decades of theorizing, Fluck pits accounts of self-alienation against theories of intersubjectivity to suggest that the concept of "recognition" might prove especially fertile with respect to his initial question. The ethics of literature, he contends, lies first and foremost in its articulation of individual, particular struggles for recognition.

Viola Marchi's essay almost works as a counter-proposal to Fluck's emphasis on recognition as she mines the thought of Levinas for a proper articulation of community from within his philosophy of radical difference and alterity that undercuts any reciprocity and posits an irreducible asymmetry to the ethical relation. Marchi proposes that such articulation may precisely be found in the concept of impersonality with its attendant emphasis on displacement, dislocation, and interruption. What Levinas ultimately proposes, Marchi suggests, is the possibility of thinking community as a space in which infinite responsibility toward the Other prevails precisely *because* the relation between Self and Other

is interrupted by an impersonal third, engendering what she calls a community without communion.

In what constitutes the final contribution to this section on "Community," Katharina Metz's essay returns us to American literary realism. In contradistinction to Ludwig's and Breitenwischer's concerns with the self and subjectivity in relation to questions of representation, Metz focuses on the more or less overt social agenda that realist works often display. Close reading William Dean Howells's *Annie Kilburn*, Metz explores the question of how the novel's reformist and thus moralist thrust chimes with realism's purported intent to represent reality as it is. Metz defends the novel against accusations of didacticism by emphasizing what she calls its strategies of reformulation, that is, strategies such as self-reflective irony that, in showing awareness of the conflicting nature of the novel's realist and reformist-moralist tendencies, gesture toward their reconciliation.

Patrick Vincent's contribution inaugurates the section on "Environment," the third and final section of this volume. In his essay, Vincent traces nineteenth-century discourses on the aesthetic and moral valence of the Swiss Alps, particularly in the writings of American environmentalist John Muir and British art critic and social thinker John Ruskin. This essay shows how their respective engagement with the Swiss landscape shaped their different programs – conservationism and nature stewardship in the case of Muir, and calls for civilizational transformation in the case of Ruskin. Along the way, Vincent analyzes little-studied travel writings by Muir.

The second contribution to this section stays focused on the nineteenth century but shifts the discussion from the aesthetic and moral appeal of the Swiss Alps to the colonization of Arctic Canada. In addition, the nineteenth century comes refracted through a twentieth century literary text as Arnaud Barras presents a reading of Rudy Wiebe's postcolonial environmental novel *A Discovery of Strangers*. Barras argues that, in invoking both the European colonial discourse of exploration and conquest and the indigenous discourse of storytelling, the novel stages what he calls a poetics of collision and a hermeneutics of discovery. In his account, rather than antithetically pitting these two discourses against one another, the novel in fact enacts and runs together a twofold dialogism: that of the Bakhtinian formal kind and that of a Plumwoodian socioecological kind.

With the third, concluding contribution to this final section, and the volume as a whole, we move from natural to medial environment. A. Elisabeth Reichel examines the importance of sound in the poetry of

early twentieth-century American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir. Reichel argues that ambivalence between what she calls "sonophobia" and "sonophilia" – terms she develops with recourse to W. J. T. Mitchell's earlier work in the field of visual culture – is at the heart of Sapir's poetry as it treats auditory sense perception as the Other of written discourse, a relation that correlates with its presentation of ethnic others as the Other of the anthropologist self and thus attests to the ideological underpinnings of such semiotic, medial, and sensory dualisms.

Reichel's explorations of the ethico-medial ramifications of anthropologically informed poetic discourse constitute an apposite conclusion to this collection, we believe, as they not only emphasize some of the most pressing issues at the heart of this volume – such as the self-Other/other relation, the moral quandaries inherent to the ideological underpinnings of such relations, and the role of literature with respect to these issues – but also point beyond literature toward mediality per se and semiotics in general thus not only opening up to a larger discourse involving a plurality of aesthetic forms and sign systems but also testifying once more to the inherently interdisciplinary scope that an American Studies perspective on ethics and morality entails.

Philipp Schweighauser and Ridvan Askin

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