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Ethics of Alterity, Confrontation and Responsibility in  
19th- to 21st-Century British Literature**

Nicolas Pierre Boileau

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- 1 Over the past twenty years or so, as the categories of post-modernism, postcolonialism, and gender theory were gradually challenged, literary critics started to re-appraise the relation between literature and moral philosophy, a return to basics as it were. In an attempt to escape generic definitions and questions that seemed to take literature for its main object and end, critics returned to philosophy. The critical debates have again brought forth the question of authority along with its related, complicated issues of authorial responsibility. The effects of modernism can still be seen in the way contemporary British fiction has incorporated the upheavals that the two world wars and subsequent political crises have caused. Authors try to represent a reality whose definition no longer seems to hold, whose coherence threatens to disintegrate, like the cracks experienced within society between self and other, the notions of community and its more worrying version, communitarianism. The seventeen articles compiled in this book focus on ethics in relation to the figure of the Other in the general context of a crisis in representation. The articles seem to be sorted according to literary history, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with a majority of articles focusing on the Modernist era, which was a time when a new way of looking at ethics emerged, notably thanks to the philosophy of Moore. This, together with some recurring references (to Ricœur, Derrida, Rancière and Attridge, etc.) and questions, contributes to forming a coherent book, revolving around common threads that will make it valuable to scholars interested in the various authors that are broached, from the lesser known Josephine Butler to Woolf and Lawrence, including Winterson and Coe, to name but a few; it will also be useful to give a broad-scaled view of the question of ethics in contemporary theory, as all the articles are solidly situated within the philosophical debate on ethics, to the extent that some will appear very abstract to those unfamiliar with these questions. The book is the result of the extensive research carried out by E.M.M.A at the university of Montpellier III, as proves the clear, dense and substantial introduction by the editors of the collection, Professors Christine Reynier<sup>1</sup> and Jean-Michel Ganteau.
- 2 The introduction presents us with the difficult notion of ethics in relation to literature. In trying to define it and delineate its proximity to and difference from the questions of morals and politics, the authors manage to point towards different directions, but they round up their argument with the more precise question of an “ethics of alterity” which gives the collection great unity. The representation of the other, which has mostly been analysed by gender and postcolonial critics, is thus approached from a novel perspective. This in turn enables C. Reynier and J.-M. Ganteau to untangle the complex definitions of ethics in philosophy, and to re-think modernity and its various aesthetical movements. Based on contemporary criticism – mainly French and Anglophone theorists –, the confrontation at stake is presented as fruitful on the level of theory, as it paves the way for a new approach to the problematic notions of responsibility, political engagement and ethics in literature. The overture thus matches the quality of most articles. The introduction painstakingly establishes links between the various articles and the understanding of ethics, the kind of reading that is done and the various authors presented. The following review therefore focuses more closely on a few articles to give the reader a more precise idea of the contents of these articles which, within the limit of the present review, cannot be fully exposed here.

- 3 The collection opens with F. Regard's superb demonstration of Josephine Butler's "literary pragmatics", which is representative of the quality of the papers collected here and the novelty of the questions they raise. Underrated as a literary artist, and often belittled for her Christian engagement, Josephine Butler is considered to be a literary author in her own right thanks to the close analysis of two important narratives which were to serve in her campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts that affected sex workers in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Frédéric Regard uses the concept of "solicitude" as defined by Ricœur to show how Butler's text redefines intersubjective relationships, thereby creating a new ethics of alterity. He then follows in the footsteps of Cixous's understanding of "humanity" to strengthen his feminist reading of Butler's text as the uncovering of some bond between self and other, a bond that usually goes neglected because of the veneer which social organisation offers. These social categories are not without their generalisations and clichés, the popular figures of the prostitute being interestingly debunked by the construction of the text – Frédéric Regard's development on the use of the myth of Philomela is quite illuminating. Another long extract enables F. Regard to expand on this demonstration by showing how Butler's text incorporates discourses in order to give way to new interpretations and to combat prejudices against the lack of a relationship between the women in the street and the more respectable ones, such as Butler herself. Opposing the views of most critics, who see Butler's texts as political pamphlets, Regard, following Rancière, considers that political movements are aesthetic and his article magnificently proves that literary pragmatics help understand how the political message is constructed within the text thanks to an ethics of alterity which renegotiates the boundary between self and other, agency and passivity, submission and power, the notions of good and bad.
- 4 David Nowell Smith, in " 'I hold it towards you': Alterity in Lyric Address", looks at the role of the addressee in lyric poetry. With the help of Attridge's philosophy, he redefines a mode of alterity with which poets are or should be engaged. Stephen Ross's "Modernist Ethics, Critique and Utopia" and Christine Froula's "Sovereign Subjects Stephen Dedalus, Irish Conscience, and *Ulysses's* Utopian Ethos" are less accessible to those who have not yet studied modernist aesthetics and its relation to ethics. Ross's discussion of the theories of Attridge, Ricœur, Adorno and Kant offers a very challenging text that understands alterity from two perspectives: the other is first and foremost the reader; but there is another figure of the other – modernity –, which by definition presents itself as that which did not exist before, that which is other. Froula's article offers a parallel between the ethics of works portraying real-life characters and that of having, as a nation, to face an other that is constructed as menacing. A number of articles are interested in the modernist era: Forster, Woolf, Joyce and Laurence are discussed in relation to the question of ethics; this may surprise those that have taken for granted the widely-held view that Modernism is amoral. It is all the more interesting to have this in mind when reading Noëlle Cuny's article on *Mr Noon*, D. H. Lawrence's posthumous novel. This novel, which raises questions relating to the complex reader-figure and aesthetics, can be read in parallel with Smith's on lyric address. Cuny reads the novel through the paronomasis between Ricoeur's *ethics* of reading and Levinas's *ethos* of alterity. She thus shows how the reader is a complex figure that is asked to become complicit in the narrator's opposition to the *doxa*, the very *doxa* which the author was grappling with in real life. The whole section dedicated to Modernism enables us to look further into complex relations between these authors, modernism as it has come to be understood, and ethics. Isabelle Brasmes chooses to focus on a paradox in Ford's *Parade's End*: according to her, the novel is built on the injunction to expose the other; and yet, the writing reveals how impossible that task is. In other words, Brasmes shows how writing resists the expression of alterity. Maria Lopez's article on Virginia Woolf is less convincing, partly because her reliance on critical references that were published thirty years ago fails to support what is otherwise a rather detailed analysis of the influence of Moorean theory on Woolf's work, in an attempt to contradict the commonly accepted view that the British author is not interested in the other, because her writing is either too selfish, or too impersonal. With her article on John Cowper Powys's *Wolf Solent*, Florence Marie-Laverrou completes this section of the collection using the theory of Ricœur, to present

the two facets of identity he analyses (*ipse* and *idem*) as a way of reading the novel. A number of articles in this collection are indeed based on the French philosopher's theory of identity, in whole or in part.

5 Rainer Emig, in "Beyond Alterity – Within Alterity", further develops the question of alterity on a philosophical level, with a minor text by Edith Sitwell. Paula Martin Salvan comments on *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), which, according to her, posits the impasse of the question of responsibility as understood by Derrida and Levinas. Julian Jimenez Hefferman in "The Lay Community: Weil, Murdoch, Badiou and the Ethics of Other-Centredness" follows up on the general idea of using contemporary theory to look at underestimated novels, here discussing *The Bell* (1958) by Murdoch. The Irish author's involvement in moral philosophy and her attitude towards it found an outlet in the consideration that the self often consisted of something other than the self: she sees the self as being representative of the way everything is constituted of odd parts, parts that are different and unrecognised. The article explores her "moral philosophy" at length and compares it to that of Weil and Badiou, but in so doing Murdoch's artistry is sometimes overlooked. This is reflected in the quasi-absence of direct quotes from Murdoch's novel as well as the article's conclusion, which surprisingly consists of a list of bullet points.

6 Laurent Mellet's "Moral Questions and Ethical Answers: On Some Responsibilities of British Satire in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries" is a thought-provoking piece that I assume to belong to a larger project which will go 'from E.M. Forster to Jonathan Coe' and which will analyse the balance between morals as self-awareness and Levinasian ethics as 'responsibility for the other'. In an article that is dense and well-written, Mellet argues for a re-appraisal of satire in British fiction not only as an instrument of morals and responsibility for oneself, but also as fostered by an ethical responsibility for the other. In so doing, Mellet's work would nicely sit with Emmanuel Bouju's essays on the political engagement and responsibility of fiction<sup>2</sup>. Laurent Mellet begins with Forster to show how the common understanding of his rather conventional satire should not mask another facet of his narrative technique that has as much to do with ethics and confrontation as with individuals and ideas. Based on this example, Laurent Mellet offers a panoramic view that goes through the Angry Young Men to broadly delineate a method of distinguishing between morals and ethics, or rather to see how fiction is reinstated as ethical as soon as it seeks to probe into the morals of its time. Dussol's article on James Kelman returns to Ricœur's philosophy, which provides the outline for his essay, based on an understanding of institutions, their relations to the self and the other, and the question of defining what a good life is. Elsa Cavalié's article on Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* could have been placed directly after Laurent Mellet as it inevitably engages with Smith's inspiration for the work, Forster's *Howards End*. However, what Elsa Cavalié is interested in is the impossibility of "connecting" humans with one another on a moral level. Elsa Cavalié's article probes into a difficult question related to the use of the intertext here: should Smith's novel be seen as a return to Moorean and Spencerian ethics, in other words as a return to a modernist aesthetics? If such is the case, Smith would be toying with the idea of the end of post-modernism. Elsa Cavalié's essay which is well-structured and offers insight into modernism, celebrates Smith's ethical work which is based on the assumption that a centring of the ideas around the human can only force readers into an ethical responsibility for the other. Eileen Williams-Wanquet contributes to the quality of this section with an article on Winterson's *Weight* (2005). Her essay is extremely well-documented, featuring an introduction that is a case in point for whoever wishes to investigate the question of ethics in regard to literature, and more precisely autobiographical writing. This is followed by extremely solid work on the text itself and is one of the most thought-provoking papers of the collection. It is followed by another paper on Winterson by Susana Onega, who has been working on the question of ethics for some time now, as can be seen in the quality of this essay<sup>3</sup>. Surprisingly, the collection finishes with Michael Kindellan's paper on the poetry of Wordsworth and J. G. Prynne, which would have sat nicely with Smith's paper that appears at the beginning of the book.

7 This collection of seventeen articles is extremely coherent and dense, and will be very useful to those interested in understanding the meaningful dialogue that can exist between contemporary

philosophy and 20th century literature. If the arguments throughout the collection are of significant quality, some papers might appear to be less convincing because they stray into abstraction and theory without reconsidering the texts they chose to analyse in the first place. The decision to organise the articles according to the chronological order of the works discussed is debatable: some titles do not immediately indicate what the article is arguing, and sections or chapters could have been helpful because the collection covers a wide range of authors and problems. Some articles would have gained credence had they been placed near other articles that sought to develop similar ideas. This remains undoubtedly a significant addition to the contemporary debate and will be an essential reference on the question of ethics. It is unfortunate that the book contains a few misprints, and that some articles have kept signs of their original speech format. This, however, does not impede the appreciation and interest one finds in reading these essays, which successfully manage to illuminate the relations between the authors discussed and their ethical involvement in the definition of and confrontation with the other.

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### Notes

1 See for example, Ch. Reynier's *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

2 For example E. Bouju, *L'Engagement littéraire*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005; *L'autorité en littérature*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010; or É. Bouju *et al.*, *Littérature et Exemplarité*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007.

3 For example, S. Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, *The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960s*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, and by the same editors, *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*, Rodopi, 2011.

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### À propos de l'auteur

Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU  
Aix-Marseille Université, LERMA EA 853

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