Ethical Criticsim

Why is ethical criticism a problem?

18th c.: (Winckelmann->) Kant -> birth of “aesthetics” as a *separate* discipline (i.e. separate from ethics and epistemology)

Epistemology: possibility conditions of judgements of knowledge.

Aesthetics: possibility conditions of judgements about the beautiful

Ethics: possibility conditions of judgements about the good.

When we form aesthetic judgements about an object, we do not care about the existence of the object, we do not want to know it, or gain knowledge from or about it. We are not interested in its moral qualities, and we do not want to use it for any purpose. We merely derive pleasure from its contemplation – > aesthetic judgement entirely disinterested – the beautiful is what pleases without interest (We can make different kinds of judgements about the same object: when we contemplate a pair of shoes in a painting by Van Gogh, we make an aesthetic judgment. When we contemplate the same object – the pair of shoes or the painting itself - in a shop, we consider its aesthetic value, its use value, and its symbolic value -> beauty is not in the object but in the subject who judges it aesthetically)

-> The realm of art is autonomous. Artworks are valuable for their own sake, not because of their service to ulterior purposes, such as moral improvement.

19th- 20th c. Oscar Wilde: Aestheticist movement: “art for art’s sake”.

“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. (“Preface” to *The* *Picture of Dorian Gray*)

pushed to extremes: “When Benvenuto Cellini crucified a living man to study the play of muscles in his death agony, the pope was right to grant him absolution. What is the death of a vague individual if it enables an immortal work to blossom, and to create, in Keats’s words, an eternal source of ecstasy?” – aesthetic considerations overwrite moral considerations

20th c: New Criticism: autonomy of art -> art independent from social, historical or political contexts + art is not there to teach us, it is independent from morality. Yet, in the guise of being ethically neutral, these critics are deeply conservative and moralising (e.g. the canon of “great English writers” has a “civilising mission”, criticism has a “moral purpose”, it is a torch that shows us the way out from the darkness of anarchy and war, “liberal humanism” etc. see: 2d handout)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| -> | however, moralising has *nothing to do* with what we call “ethical criticism” |  |

Early (!) Deconstruction: interest in the text itself – “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida) – history, politics, power are considered to be the effects of discourse/texts/language

In the 1990s: “ethical turn” in literary criticism

1. second half of the 1980s: the radical scepticism associated with post-structuralist and post-modern theories, and especially deconstruction, is seen as nihilistic. Relativist position (the focus on ambiguities and irony) as well as the exclusive concern with texts are deemed not only apolitical but also irresponsible. Can history, and especially the trauma, the tragedies of history, pains and wounds be reduced to the status of textual effects? (Yet: this criticism is not valid: deconstruction does have a politics and an ethics – Foucault, Derrida, or J. Butler are deeply concerned with political and ethical questions)

2. Paul de Man (who was born is Belgium, but emigrated to the US after WW II, and became the leading decontructive theorist of Romanticism, as well as Derrida’s good friend at Yale University) dies in 1983. In 1987, the young Belgian scholar, Ortwin de Graef discovers that de Man contributed review articles to a newspaper controlled by the Nazi occupiers of Belgium in 1941 and 1942. One in particular, “The Jews in Contemporary Literature”, used the language of anti-Semitism (difference between Jewish literature and the rest) in a country where a large proportion of the Jewish population was to be deported to concentration camps. To those who considered that deconstruction denied any possibility of reference and determinable meaning, this hidden secret suddenly became the explanatory force behind de Man’s alleged scepticism about referential truth (cf: the distinction bw. referential truth and the referential function of language). -> De Man’s whole carrier was retrospectively rewritten as determined by this secret. Those associated with deconstruction at Yale (such as Derrida) were also forced to reassess de Man’s career.

Ethical Criticism: 3 trends

1. Ethical philosophers turn to literary works – e.g. Martha Nussbaum
2. Deconstructive literary critics turn to ethics, and defend Paul de Man:
   1. the ethics of reading (J.Hillis Miller)
   2. ethics as reading (Derrida, Derek Attridge, Robert Eaglestone, Cathy Caruth) -

Ethical criticism does NOT consider artworks as moral claims, as objects that have a message to be deciphered. Ethical criticism is NOT something that says that say that the “message” or the “moral” of a given literary work is such and such, for instance that Wordsworth teaches us to love nature. But:

1. Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947): ethical philosopher with an interests in literature.

Fictional narratives “cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars [...] to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new, to care deeply about chance happenings in the world [...] to wait for the outcome, and to be bewildered to wait and float and to be actively passive” (*Love’s Knowledge,* 1990)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | ->e.g. She teaches philosophy to law students, and gives them, for instance, Dickens’s novels to teach them *how* it is to be poor and marginal. Of course, law students now that oppression and poverty is bad (this would be the “message”, or the “moral” of D’s works), however, Nussbaum’s aim is to show the *how it feels like* to be poor. -> art makes us better citizens of the world: *Poetic Justice* (1996) |  |
|  |

<- advocates an ethics, and a strategy of reading based on “sympathy” and “sympathetic imagination”: we identify/sympathise with the characters and become better people. She claims to draw her arguments from Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):

“How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. […]By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. For as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception.”

While reading a novel, we learn what it would be like to be a certain character in a certain kind of situation. This is good mainly if it subverts or calls into question our settled moral views. E.g, an 18th century male reader of Richardson’s *Pamela* took it for granted that it was normal for an aristocrat to seduce a maid servant (i.e. Pamela). However, the novel subverts his settled views: the male reader is forced to sympathise with Pamela, to feel how it would feel like to be in her situation -> the novel has a moral effect.

Or: we sympathise with Anzaldua (Borderlands), we can imagine her point of view, we can imaginatively place ourselves in her situation -> sympathy with her makes us better people, with a respect and even sympathy for otherness.

However, as the quotation from Smith also suggests: “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what *we ourselves* should feel in the *like* situation.” -> according to Adam Smith sympathy is, in fact, self-projection.

Nussbaum is criticised by ethically oriented deconstructionist critics, and, particularly, Robert Eaglestone, for 3 reasons.

1. Nussbaum draws an equation between characters and people. Yet, characters are linguistic constructs, they are primarily textual and we cannot simply skip narrative techniques, the medium that presents them: E.g: *Pamela* can be read, as it was indeed read by Henry Fielding in the 18th century, as the journal of a hypocritical woman (Pamela) who does everything and uses all her womanly means to get married to a lord. This reading is made possible by the fact that the novel is narrated in first person singular by Pamela -> without having access to any other point of view, we cannot be sure that she is a reliable narrator. <- Texts are inherently ambiguous, etc. -> Nussbaum is blind to the ambiguities of the next, she offers reductive readings, she thinks that the moral truths in a work are directly available, and there is no need for any act of interpretation. She offers literature *as* moral philosophy.
2. Nussbaum bases her theory on the emotional response of the reader, and on the possibility of identification. She thinks that it is possible to put ourselves in the other’s situation and thereby feel exactly what it would feel like to be in his or her situation. Of course, this claim is also highly questionable. Can we ever entirely identify with another? Some narratives are precisely about the limits of “sympathetic imagination”. As for Adam Smith, whose work Nussbaum uses (and *misreads*!) argues as follows: „As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, *we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected*, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.” (*TMS*)
3. Nussbaum has a very limited view of the canon
4. She neglects the social, political, cultural embeddedness of literary works, she forgets that novels are written from a certain specific subject position, that they are not things that transcend their age.

see also the quotation in the beginning, with an emphasis on undecidability:

“I still believe that no good joke is ever racist. And I believe it for the same reasons that I believe no good play or novel is ever racist, regardless of the politics of its author. The discourse of racism is bald, monotonous, unquestioning, single-voiced and desolate. Art, when it is good... is none of those things. Art is dramatic, and by dramatic I mean that it holds everything in opposition and suspense. / The moment art forgets it is dramatic and grows tendentious, the moment it begins to formulate a programme for the amelioration of mankind, or for spreading faith of disbelief, or for promoting racial disquiet or racial harmony, it ceases to be art. Call it a little novel, comprising voices at intellectual and moral odds with one another, taking you by surprise and told, vertiginously, by a narrator it would not be wise of you to trust.” (Howard Jacobson, qtd. by Stephen Mulhall, in *The Wounded Animal, J.M, Coetzee & the Difficulty of Reality in Literature & Philosophy,* 2009.)

[Coleridge’s critique of sympathy/sensibility in 1825 (!):

Sympathy/Sensibility is “far from being either Morality, or one with the Moral Principle ... the very term Sensibility, marks its *passive* nature, and in its mere self, apart from Choice and Reflection, it proves little more than the coincidenceor contagion of pleasurable or painful Sensations in different persons.(*OM,* 58) -> Col. places the emphasis on the importance of Moral Acts of Will, and self-reflection, because sympathy is merely a passive contagion of sensations.].

II. decontructive ethics of reading: J. Hillis Miller: *The Ethics of Reading* (1987)

Reading itself is an ethical act: close-reading and deconstruction mean that we respect the otherness of the text the same way as we respect the otherness of people. Reading must be ethical in the sense of accounting for and disclosing all the ambiguities rather than aiming for a totalising closure.

“[if] this phrase [i.e the ethics of reading] means anything, it must have something to do with respecting any text discussed, with accepting an obligation to read carefully, patiently, scrupulously, under the elementary assumption that the text being read may say something different from what one wants or expects it to say or from what received opinion says it says.” (284)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
|  |

E.g. Shoshana Felman’s reading of James’s *The Turn of the Screw*: no ultimate meaning.<- first person singular narration by the governess: 1. psychoanalytic reading: the ghosts that the governess can see are the figments of the governess’s deluded imagination 2. New Critical reading: the ghosts that the governess can see are real, they symbolise “evil forces” -> both readings reduce the ambiguity of the story. <- identification with (sympathy for) the governess does not give a valid interpretation.

Task of the critic: to respect the ambiguities of the text, to remain in uncertainties -> emphasis on respect (rather than sympathy).

Miller is criticised because: ethics equals narrative unreadablity, reduces all questions of truth, responsibility and self-knowledge to a play of rhetorical codes and figurations; as if reading occured in a vacuum, unaffected by the institutional, political, social and historical world of the reader or the text.

III. Derrida: even though each reading is a misreading, each reading is an act of *decision* and *responsibility* – the critic responds, with responsibility, to the irreducible alterity (otherness) of the text (text understood as all kinds of signifying practices, *not* only books or novels or poems or plays). The text cannot be reduced to norms, schema, signifying totalities, there is no way to sympathise or identify with it, but one hast to respect its difference, its otherness, its alterity, and respond, with responsibility, accordingly. Each decision (in reading) is *singular,* and is dependent on the (political, historical, geographical, cultural, etc) singularity of both the text and the context (that of the text and that of the reader).

E.g. Derrida reads Plato’s writings in the context of 9/11, i.e. in the context of global terrorism – (*Philosophy in a Time of Terror,* 2002)

Influenced by the philosophy of

Emmanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995) L. was born and grew up in Lithuania, in a Jewish family influenced by Enlightenment traditions. Having completed his doctorate in Germany (where he read Husserl and Heidegger), he moved to Paris. During WW II, volunteered for the French army and was captured by the Germans - he spent the rest of the war as a member of a Jewish forced-labor force. (His parents and brothers, in Lithuania, were murdered during the Holocaust.) After the war, Levinas returned to Paris.

"ethics as first philosophy": The traditional philosophical pursuit of knowledge is secondary to a basic ethical duty to the Other. The ethical relation to alterity has a priority over any other relation. The Other is not knowable and cannot be made into an object of knowledge. Responsibility to the Other is prior to any act of cognition, to any conscious act. It is not something based on knowledge or principles (i.e. the ethical act is *not* determined either by the knowledge of the other/the situation, or by any normative principle). The possibility of acting ethically is rooted in a condition of passivity, in which I am compelled to respond to the command coming from an absolute Other *(autrui),* with whom I find myself in a "face-to-face " relation. It is a condition in which I find myself responding to an unconditional demand, made upon me by a singular Other, or by the “face” of the singular Other. (warning!: Levinas’s Other is close to the “Other” of postcolonial theory, but clearly distinct from, even opposite to the “Other” in Lacan. Also: “face” does not have to be taken literally – it rather points to an absolute vulnerability that discloses itself. Of course, by opening myself up to this absolute Other, I immediately make myself vulnerable as well, but this is why responsibility and opening are proper to an *ethical* condition that always has a priority,and that has nothing to do with utilitarian or rational considerations, such as: is it good *for me* to open myself?)

->Derrida: “I have to - and that's an unconditional injunction - I have to welcome the Other whoever he or she is unconditionally, without asking for a document, a name, a context, or a passport. That is the very first opening of my relation to the Other: to open my space, my home - my house, my language, my culture, my nation, my state, and myself. I don't have to open it, because it is open, it is open before I make a decision about it: then I have to keep it open or try to keep it open unconditionally. But of course this unconditionality is a frightening thing, it's scary.”

Levinas:

“Saying” (+) as opposed to the “said” (-).

E.g. we respond to the Ancient Mariner’s “saying” (i.e. to the rime itself as a whole that keeps recurring, to the tormented narrative, to the way the Mariner addresses us, and the wedding guest), we respond to the Mariner (to the Other), rather than to his “message” or “moral” (He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all) -> the two (the saying and the said) even contradict each other int he poem: if God loves us all, then why does the Mariner have to eternally suffer? Why is not there any possibility for redemption?

Other possible interpretation of the Rime with a focus on the albatross, as a singularity, as “bare life” via Agamben. In this case, the Mariner is erasing the “bare life” of the albatross, and enacts the violence of the Law.

Somewhat *avant la lettre*:

## Wayne Booth: *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988)

Narratives always interpret life: they tell us about our lives and other possible lives. When we read a story we find ourselves in a world different from our own; we are exposed to the "Other" and to other value systems -> we are *changed* by our reading, narratives shape our lives, influence our decisions and values e.g. Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice,* Orwell’s *1984*, Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*.

Our perception of life is shaped by the novels + we evaluate/judge the characters, ask what we would or should (!) do in their situation, what options do they/we have -> Ethical reader: in a position of constant negotiation between a serious commitment to his or her own ethical standards, and a constant openness to the standards of others, and a willingness to alter his or her original position if necessary. -> change.

B. explores “values” implicit in literary works –> “value”: ambiguous term <- actualised by the reader, but the reader does not judge from a neutral or objective vantage point: “the minds we use in judging stories have been in part constituted by the stories we judge; there is no control group of untouched souls who have lived without narrative.”

Questions he asks: “Should I believe this narrator? Am I willing to be the kind of person that this storyteller is asking me to be? Will I accept the author among the small circle of my true friends?” (39) -> considers implied authors as potential friends – the reader decides whether s/he would cultivate friendship with such a person.