

*Make Words, Not War:
Notes Towards a Literary Ethics Between Fundamentalism
and Arbitrariness¹*

Keywords: Ethics; orientation; patterns; conflict; dialogue; conversation; consensus

Abstract: We live in an age of proliferating conflicts, an age that is characterized by the falling apart of old explanatory patterns on the one hand and the often fundamentalist and even violent re-assertion of particular positionalities on the other. Concepts such as the notion of truth have become problematic and have been relativized by postmodern thinkers, and so have the norms and structures based upon essentialist truth claims. Conversely, where to position oneself and how to construct cultural patterns of orientation has become one of the most urgent and difficult tasks of the individual as well as of whole societies since we are placed between the Scylla of an old-fashioned essentialism and the Charybdis of a new-fangled arbitrary valuelessness in which anything goes. These issues often give rise to violent conflict and they raise important ethical questions. This article discusses the function of literature as one of the prime tools used by humans in order to turn the contingent chaos of experience into structured orientational patterns. It presents a conversational ethics of dialogic exchange and negotiation which accepts the conversational gambit posed by otherness. This approach advocates openness and tolerance towards difference while insisting on the necessity of particularity and positionality. The article in this context discusses the uses and pitfalls of universalism as well as of particularity, and it probes the possibility of establishing consensus in the midst of conflict and incommensurability.

We live in an age that is characterized by wars and violence, as a brief look at the daily news shows. Ever since 9/11, one of the major confrontations in the world has by many been seen to be one between the West and Islam, and thus cultural differences have come to be perceived as one of the mainsprings of war. Five years before the attacks on the Twin Towers in Manhattan, Samuel P. Huntington, in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, claimed that the main divisions of the world and the resulting armed conflicts are due to the violent juxtaposition of the alterities of the planet's main civilizations. When cultural differences are turned into fundamentalist essentialisms, the result is often terror and war. As Amartya Sen has pointed out,

[t]he art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have. The result can be homespun elemental violence, or globally artful violence and terrorism." (xv)

* University of Cologne, Germany; H.Antor@uni-koeln.de

¹ A version of this article was delivered as a keynote speech at the "Tales of War" conference in Bucharest

Conversely, cultural theorists such as Jacques Derrida, the Yale Critics and many others in the post-structuralist and deconstructivist movement have invalidated the notion of essential foundations of any sort as a metaphysical delusion and have substituted the infinite deferral of meaning in the endless semiotic realm of *différance* for older teleologies and critical as well as ethical norms. The resulting crisis of authority on the one hand seems to have opened up a wide discursive space for a postmodern "anything goes", but on the other hand it has also provided new ground for an intensifying debate on issues of moral theory in what Alasdair MacIntyre, in his famous book, has called the age "after virtue."

Are we caught up in between fundamentalist war-mongers and the arbitrariness of absolute relativism? How can we find our bearings in such a world and avoid an incessant series of bellicose clashes while at the same time allowing us to honour our various cultural values in peaceful coexistence? Again, it is the nobel laureate Amartya Sen who points the way to us when he says:

The prospect of peace in the contemporary world may well lie in the recognition of the plurality of our affiliations and in the use of reasoning as common inhabitants of a wide world, rather than making us inmates rigidly incarcerated in little containers. What we need, above all, is a clear-headed understanding of the importance of the freedom that we can have in determining our priorities. And, related to that understanding, we need an appropriate recognition of the role and efficacy of reasoned public voice - within nations and across the world." (xvii)

It is my claim here that the practice of writing and reading literature and of literary criticism, if understood and engaged in as an ethical undertaking, can take us a long way towards an attitude that makes Sen's vision of peace possible.

Indeed, there has been renewed interest in ethics in recent years, and this has not only been restricted to philosophy as an academic discipline as such, but it has also led to a similar development in literary studies, particularly since the late 1980s. Although Martha Nussbaum, in her article "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory", first published in 1987, complains about the disregard into which ethical questions seem to have fallen in literary criticism, her own work as well as book-length studies by Wayne C. Booth and J. Hillis Miller together with a number of articles published in several scholarly journals meanwhile form the kernel of a fertile field of the ethics of literature and criticism, which we think will be able to exert a positive influence on the subject of literary studies and should consequently be further elaborated. We would therefore like to show here that the ethics of criticism can provide an answer to the implicit question of "Why Literature Matters".

The "literary/ethical linkages" (Gras 30, fn.1) of recent years take up an age-old tradition that goes back well into Antiquity. Literature and ethics have been related to each other ever since the time of Homer and the ancient Greek philosophers. As Alisdair MacIntyre has pointed out (120ff.), ethics as a philosophical discipline only came into existence as a response to the literary portrayal of heroic society in Homer's *Iliad*. Moral thinking took its origin in reflections about what goes on in the stories told us in

connection with the Trojan War, and our oldest and most venerable ethical philosophers, such as Aristotle and the tradition he initiated, are indebted to the portrayal of the heroic virtues we come across in Homer or the virtues of democratic Athens we can find in Sophocles. Ever since those early days the moral and the aesthetic were in close contact with each other, and it was only in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that this link showed signs of stress and the moral, the aesthetic, the theological and the legal realms were clearly distinguished (MacIntyre 39).

Nevertheless, there have always been moral philosophers who have emphasized the relationship between their field of enquiry and that of the literary scholar. This holds true even of our postmodern times when questions as to the highest good are often eyed with more than ordinary scepticism. This is due to a fundamental similarity between the ways of thinking dominant in the philosophical and the literary spheres. Moral philosophers at all times have had recourse to narrative structures and stories in order to develop their ideas of the good life and of the virtues. The Christian ethic is based on the stories in the Bible, and even our latest thinkers in the field of ethics insist on their need for narrativity as an indispensable tool. MacIntyre, for example, puts this in the following words: "Every particular view of the virtues is linked to some particular notion of the narrative structure or structures of human life" (174)².

Most of us also think of our lives and of what constitutes the good life for us in terms of narrative structure, and as children and even in adult life we are socialized and educated into the virtues through the telling of stories (cf. MacIntyre 216). For the American philosopher John Dewey, therefore, "imagination is the chief instrument of the good" (Dewey 348), and his follower Richard Rorty points out that "there is, after all, no distinction between the aesthetic and the moral" (*Contingency* 159). We have just shown that ethics came into being as a response to literary texts, but Rorty also states that "literary interest will always be parasitic on moral interest", because "you cannot create a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion about how your reader should act" (*Contingency* 167). Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum, to name but the most prominent exponents of this tendency of thought, are two further important contemporary philosophers who stress the importance of literature to their work.

With this history of the mutually fruitful relationship of the two disciplines in mind, we cannot be surprised to find Wayne C. Booth reflecting about the ethics of fiction and J. Hillis Miller talking about the ethics of reading. But what can the ethics of criticism, as we could also call this field with reference both to the text and the reader, be like in an age which places us between the Scylla of an old-fashioned essentialism and the Charybdis of a new-fangled arbitrary valuelessness in which anything goes?

² Cf. Miller 2: "Without storytelling there is no theory of ethics. Narratives, examples, stories [...] are indispensable to thinking about ethics. An understanding of ethics as a region of philosophical or conceptual investigation depends, perhaps surprisingly, on mastery of the ability to interpret written stories, that is, on a kind of mastery usually thought to be the province of the literary critic."

The Waning of Truth

The ethics of criticism in the postmodern era have to take into account the implications of our world pictures and some anthropological facts about how man deals with his surroundings. The postmetaphysical turn of much of recent philosophy has led to a new awareness of the contingency of the world. The old causal and metaphysical explanations can no longer hold and have been deconstructed as nothing but forms of essentialism that posit the existence of foundations, but can only have recourse to circular arguments that do not prove anything or to acts of faith that can never be shared by all. These descriptions of the world have lost their claims to being representations of truth or even The Truth. They have lost their status of a way of access to a metaphysical Reality "out there" so that instead of being regarded as something given they are now looked upon as something made, a tool used by man to cope with the contingency s/he is surrounded by. The very plurality of world pictures and philosophical systems underlines their instrumental character and undermines their ontological authority, since the notion of a single ultimate Truth would render such plurality impossible or reveal as lies all systems of thought except one. The ultimate Truth status of such a hypothetical system of thought, however, can never be proved, since truth is a property of sentences and therefore situated in the realm of the linguistic (cf. Rorty, *Contingency* 21). The only conceptual means we can use in the attempt to prove the truth value of a proposition, however, are those of language, as the deconstructionists have shown (cf. Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* 59). We are caught then in the prisonhouse of language and therefore in a vicious argumentative circle that disables us to find foundations outside the linguistic tools we have to use.³ Ever since Nietzsche, our becoming aware of the contingency of the universe has led to a loss of horizon and an experience of disenchantment that Charles Taylor has characterized as "the dissipation of our sense of cosmos as a meaningful order" (17).

Patterns, Frameworks, and Horizons, Structured Order and Contingent Chaos

Most people do not like the developments in philosophy described so far. The widespread and popular moaning about the loss of order and of values is just a symptom of the fundamental gap between a world full of accidentals and lacking in causal finality and determinacy on the one hand and what we would here like to call our anthropological set-up on the other. For faced with the unstructured heterogeneity of contingency man feels at a loss as to what and where s/he is. The act of positioning and defining oneself, however, presupposes a map which structures the world and gives one a framework within the coordinates of which one can determine one's own place in the universe and thereby create one's own self. Therefore, in an attempt to establish finite boundaries and recognizable structures, man tries to orient him-/herself by creating conceptual patterns of thought and by telling the story of his/her world picture. "[M]an is a pattern-building

³ The notion of language as a tool goes back to Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson and is also used by Richard Rorty in his demonstration of the contingency of the world (10).

animal" (Antor 40) and cannot help creating explanatory structures and meanings because, as the psycholinguist I. M. Schlesinger has pointed out, "[h]uman nature abhors a semantic vacuum" (Schlesinger 68). The contingent and chaotic inconsistency of the universe, then, is transformed by man into a consistent cosmos which provides orientation, interpretability and a value system and therefore caters for our deepest anthropological needs. The patterns, frameworks and horizons (or whatever one might want to call them) we build are something we absolutely require as well as something we cannot escape without serious consequences, as Charles Taylor explains:

[...] doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; [...] the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood. [...] To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame of horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (27)

It becomes quite clear here that the contingency of the world triggers off a process of pattern-building in us that leads both to acts of self-creation and to ethical judgments. These two aspects are inextricably interwoven and will always be linked with each other and cannot be separated. To know who one is also is to take a distinct position with regard to ethical questions. The problem we are faced with nowadays, however, is that whereas in pre-modern times there was believed to be such a thing as a universal framework because certain explanatory patterns or world pictures were taken to be universally accepted, such things can no longer hold today and we are faced with a multiplicity of horizons and patterns that makes it difficult for us again to find the orientation we are so desperately seeking. The simple solution of adopting any one of the many frameworks on offer is no longer a feasible one because such a way out is rendered impossible by our postmodern awareness of their constructivist character that makes claims of moral ontology so highly doubtful. It is again Charles Taylor who has poignantly described our situation:

[...] frameworks today are problematic. This vague term points towards a relatively open disjunction of attitudes. What is common to them all is the sense that no framework is shared by everyone, can be taken for granted as *the* framework tout court, can sink to the phenomenological status of unquestioned fact. (17)

We seem to be caught then in an epistemological as well as an ethical impasse, since our awareness of the precarious status of our pattern-building processes amounts to the realization that we aspire to the impossible and cannot have what we really want. How can we deal with this dilemma, and what can be the role of literature in such an attempt?

Man's chief instrument of pattern-building, of course, is language, and we would like to suggest here that literature as the most immediately linguistic form of art is a particularly active and conscious mode of pattern-building and of framing horizons. For

what happens when we are confronted with a literary work of art is a meeting of horizons, a coming together of the frameworks of author and reader.⁴ One way of looking at the world and making sense of it is confronted with another. One attempt at inscribing consistency into the complex and contingent inconsistency of the universe is confronted with another. For a literary text is nothing but such an attempt, as Wolfgang Iser has pointed out in his reader-response theory: “[...] no literary text refers to contingent reality as such, but to models or concepts of reality, [...] in which contingencies and complexities are reduced to meaningful structure” (70).

Literature, then, is a paradigm for our ways of dealing with the world and encapsulates our strategies of making sense of our lives, of connecting up with what we are surrounded by. We use narratives, both in the literary sphere and in everyday life, as tools that enable us to form coherent wholes and thus establish a rapport with the contingency we would not otherwise be geared to cope with. We can therefore extend our definition of man as a pattern-building animal by saying that s/he is at the same time "a story-telling animal" (MacIntyre 216). Wayne C. Booth has shown that we cannot be otherwise:

[...] every story offers us the pleasure of imagining characters and events in some world not exactly our own, of wondering how those events will turn out, and of concluding that somehow they have hung together. We are so determined to have this pleasure that we will try to find it even where it is not offered. We treat 'formless' stories just as we treat the generally *unstoried* world that meets us daily: we turn it into meaning-ridden story. Psychologists have found not only that everybody can discern engaging narratives in the entirely plotless Thematic Apperception Test but that all of us spontaneously make narratives out of just about every bit of information that comes our way. We long for intense engagement in a story, and we long for a coherent story of our own lives. (*Company* 192)

The Ethics of Conversation

Since, as we have shown above, pattern-building processes and the acts of self-creation they involve always imply value-judgments, taking a stand or what we would like to call positionality, literature as a medium of such practices is *per se* situated in the realm of the ethical. Wayne C. Booth therefore is fully justified when he talks about "the *ethical* [emphasis mine] relations between authors and readers" ("Narrative Choices" 58). We would like here to point out that the term 'ethical' in our context is no longer to be understood as referring to the search for and the description of the *summum bonum*, such as for example in George Edward Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903),⁵ but as in Booth in its

⁴ One would have to distinguish here, of course, between historical and implied author and narrator as well as between implied, intended and actual or historical reader. I have discussed the implications of these distinctions for the ethics of criticism elsewhere ("Ethical Plurivocality", 31ff.) and will not have to repeat them in our present context.

⁵ Moore sets out to answer the question "What is good?" and then states that "to the discussion of this question [...] I give the name of Ethics" (3). Although Moore calls the notion of 'good' "indefinable" (9), he does describe what he considers "[b]y far the most valuable things" (188). It must be conceded, however, that his definition of the latter as "the pleasures of human intercourse

etymological sense as referring to the concept of 'character' and "the encounters of a story-teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener" (*Company* 8). The confrontation of the pattern-building processes that help create our selves and that make us into characters turns the process of reading as an encounter between author, narrator or story-teller and reader or between different readers talking about the same text into an inherently ethical undertaking. It is because of these two dimensions - the solitary act of reading itself and the intersubjective negotiation of interpretations by and between different readers - that we prefer the more general term 'the ethics of criticism' to 'the ethics of fiction' or 'the ethics of reading.'

Our understanding of the term 'ethical' as referring to characters makes us adherents of a conversational model of literary criticism, since whether we talk about what happens in a reader's head when he opens a book⁶ or about what goes on in an exchange between critics or literary scholars, it will always be a form of conversation we are confronted with. Now conversational approaches in themselves are nothing new in recent literary theory. Similar concepts are used by Gadamer in his thoughts on hermeneutic conversation as a means of understanding a literary text (270ff.), by Richard Rorty in his reflections on how to live as a liberal ironist who is aware of the contingency of his explanatory patterns (*Contingency*, xv and *passim*) and in Wayne C. Booth's notion of coduction (*Company* 72 and *passim*). However, in literary theory as in philosophy itself, we are faced with the problem of how to square the circle and find a middle way between the positions of the communicative ethics group represented by such thinkers as Apel, Habermas and Benhabib, to name but a few, and the ideas of hermeneutical neo-Aristotelians such as Gadamer himself, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, amongst many others. The question for us will be how to avoid both a purely procedural form of the ethics of criticism and a reductionist view that would finally amount to a disguised new foundationalism.

Tackling Alterity, or: The Importance of Travel

This takes us back to the question of what happens when we read a literary text and discuss it with other readers. First of all, we are faced with an other in the text, for example the voice of the narrator or of the implied author and his/her implied world picture, explanatory patterns, horizon or framework. The latter may or may not coincide and agree with our own. Complete identity of horizons, however, is highly unlikely if not impossible. The experience of alterity, then, is one of the basic qualities of the process of reading, and the same applies to the negotiation of different readings among critics. There may often be partial consensus as to individual points, but the conflicting opinions of encounters with the other can hardly ever be avoided.

and the enjoyment of beautiful objects" (188) shows certain parallels to our approach in its stressing of the link between ethics and aesthetics and in its implied emphasis on the interactional aspect of human conversation, as will be apparent from our further thoughts.

⁶ On the act of reading itself as an ethical conversation cf. Booth, *Company*, *passim*.

How do we deal with the challenge of alterity? How can we settle with the conversational "gambit" (*Company* 135, cf. 207) the framework of the author or of my fellow critic poses to us in its difference from ours? One way of settling the matter would be to decide who is right and who is wrong. This would easily have been possible in pre-modern times with their consensus as to what is Truth and with their clear-cut vision of moral ontology. This, however, can no longer be a route open to us in the age of the pluralification of truths and values as well as the absence of a unifying universal framework. Whose standards would we find acceptable as a basis for such a settlement and which rationality would we defer to? Such a deductive procedure (*Company* 71) would only presuppose our subscribing to certain norms which in their turn would imply the existence of certain essentials we could only posit again and again. This, however, would inevitably lead us into the foundational fallacy.

Gadamer's hermeneutics acknowledge the problem of alterity and do not posit a simplistic right/wrong decision that would lead either to complete assimilation or accommodation with regard to the other.⁷ He sees the true place of hermeneutics in the space between the familiarity of the known and the strangeness and otherness of the new and unknown (300). Gadamer accepts the other as such in as far as he demands the recognition of the other's alterity (309), but he is not willing to leave it at that. Instead he tries to overcome the gap between the understanding subject and the other it is confronted with by seeking a fusion of the two horizons involved (311). But can such a fusion of horizons always be achieved? Gadamer uses the term when talking about the encounter between the present horizon of the reader and the historical and comparatively static horizon of the text. But what if we think of the confrontation of two present horizons, such as in the case of two literary critics discussing their reactions to the same literary text? It is highly improbable in such an instance that consensus in the form of a fusion of horizons can always be reached (cf. Antor 39 and Bredella 478). Gadamer's concept is too harmonistic and describes the ethically more uncomplicated instances of reading and understanding texts and negotiating their meanings. But, one might ask, could not the consequence of all this be an isolationist view in which we are degraded to separate reading monads without any connection at all and without any possibility of coming to terms with the other? However, we do not say that a fusion of horizons is not possible or that our monad has no windows through which a merging with the other could be initiated. We are simply saying that such a fusion is not particularly likely to happen. This does not mean that if there is no fusion of horizons there cannot be a change of horizon either, to use Hans Robert Jauß's more convincing term (177). For even if we cannot fuse our horizon with that of the other, the encounter might make us change our ways of thinking and consequently our explanatory patterns. But it must also be admitted that not even such a change can be guaranteed.

This latter possibility confronts us with the objection why one should bother at all and read a literary text and then maybe even discuss it with somebody else if one might end up just where one started? Yet, we should not forget that although such an outcome

⁷ On the dialectics between assimilation and accommodation cf. Bredella 478-483. Bredella also summarizes criticisms of Gadamer that - contrary to our position here - accuse him of assimilation.

may very well be what we are faced with, more often than not the quality of our horizon will have changed. We may have come home again after our intellectual encounter with the other, but in the course of this challenge we have had an experience of defamiliarization and seen our own patterns and frameworks from outside, namely from the external point of view of the author or our partner in a hermeneutic conversation about a literary text. We have travelled and therefore our horizon has widened, even though it may not have changed fundamentally. We do not seek change for change's sake and therefore are also critical about Richard Rorty's strong emphasis on the importance of the new in so far as it could be misunderstood in that way.⁸ What is important is that we do not close ourselves off against the other and his/her frameworks. It is essential that we accept this challenge to our own explanatory patterns and do not retire into our own horizon as if we were indeed a windowless monad since that would be essentialist behaviour and would imply that we insist on the absolute Truth value of our position. In such a case reading and discussing books would make no sense to us and we could not really be bothered any more to make the intellectual effort involved. We would become narrow-minded, and we would have to pay dearly for the snug complacency of our imagined new security within our supposedly true pattern of the universe. We would make it a matter of principle always to stay at home with the thoughts we have always thought, and the realm of the ethical would have been left far behind us. We would become isolated in our intellectual rigidity and could only either stop perceiving the existence of others or wage war on them. Such a flight into the monological condition of a single horizon cannot be what we want or what could help us to live the good life.

What we need, then, is a willing suspension of disbelief in the greater persuasiveness of the other's framework as well as the willing suspension of belief in the validity of our own. We have to seek out what is different from us and compare our ways with those of the others. We must get rid of any anxiety of influence and willingly embrace the unfamiliar. As Wayne C. Booth has pointed out, "tolerance of many different views is never enough; we should insist on them, seek them out" (*Company* 365). At the same time, it must be clear that this cannot and need not amount to an intellectual sell-out. As Wayne C. Booth puts it, "[i]t is not [...] that in identifying we stop thinking our own thoughts but rather that 'our own' thoughts now become different from what they were" (*Company* 140). The fact that we should always try to look out for how the others see the world and try to get acquainted with their horizons does not necessarily imply that we have to accept their frameworks. As has already been pointed out above, we are free to reconfirm our own explanatory patterns after an open and fair appraisal of those of our neighbours as long as we are willing to take the risk of having a close look at them,

⁸ For Rorty, "the important boundary to cross is [...] the one which divides the old from the new" (*Contingency* 29). We are sceptical about Rorty's way of phrasing this because it might be misunderstood as an appeal to blindly accept anything different from what we know simply for difference's sake. This might lead to a frantic search for anything new and finally to an unreflected entropic dissolution of all patterns that would in the end amount to a raping of our anthropological set-up. As an appeal to look out for the other and seek other horizons different from my own *and then critically engage with them* we can accept Rorty's position. It must be stated for fairness's sake that Rorty does not exclude this although he does not discuss it explicitly.

"whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter" (*Contingency* 67).

The Loss of Teleology and Universalism

This approach, however, may seem as idealistic as Gadamer's concept of the fusion of different horizons and poses a number of questions we will have to deal with here. The first one is that of where such a practice will lead us. Could one not object that if the be all and the end all of my reading and discussing literary texts as major sources of the other is the confrontation with the negativity of difference, then this might not take me anywhere at all? Such a question, however, implies a hidden teleology and the idea of a linear progression towards some final truth or metaphysical centre. In the age of post-structuralism and deconstruction, however, such an essentialist model has to be replaced by a post-teleological one⁹ of the dynamics of infinite development. Teleology caters for the human need of building patterns and meaning, but it is not generally available. Any claim for a particular *telos* will always depend on the claimant's individual horizon and can never be raised to the level of universal truth unless by means of power and force in a totalitarian system. MacIntyre rightly says in this context:

When men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily and too completely with the cause of some universal principle, they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do. (221)

We therefore prefer Isaiah Berlin's notion of 'negative liberty' which in *Two Concepts of Liberty* is set against telic conceptions of human perfectibility (cf. Rorty, *Contingency* 45). In terms of literary interpretation this renders the notion of *the* correct reading of a text highly suspicious. But does this necessarily mean that together with John Carey we have to talk about the "end of evaluation" (204)? Carey approves of the fact that "[n]owadays almost no one believes in the possibility of objective or 'correct' literary judgments any longer" although, as Booth notes in his criticism of Carey (*Company* 31), in his book on Donne he calls the metaphysical writer one of the "great poets" (*John Donne* 260) and praises Donne's "complete success" (278). Carey has to be understood correctly here as pronouncing the death of objective or correct literary judgments *that claim universal validity* rather than of evaluative judgments of any kind. Booth is clearly wrong when he sees Carey's appreciation of Donne's greatness as a flat contradiction to his theoretical statements on literary evaluation. We may live in a post-teleological and post-essentialist age in which universal truth and norms can no longer be proved and have therefore lost their claim to authority, but that does not mean that we cannot form personal preferences and negotiate them in an interpretive community trying to persuade others to adopt them. On the contrary, we would like to argue here that it is not in spite of the loss of universally accepted virtues and values but indeed *because of it* that we can

⁹ Henry Sidgwick in the late nineteenth century was one of the first to accept the loss of teleology for ethics (cf. MacIntyre 64f).

and even *ought* to take a stand, form our own judgments and compare our evaluations with those of others. The anthropological necessity of positioning ourselves mentioned above, then, turns into an ethical must. It is precisely because we have overcome the monolingual linearity of universal judgments and left the absolute moral obligations of The Law behind us that we have entered the realm of the ethical in the etymological sense in which it has been defined above.

It must not be concluded, however, that we speak in favour of the arbitrariness of "anything goes" here. The crisis of Kantian universalizability does not leave us in a void. We cannot disregard the fact that we live in a number of interpretive communities, for example in that of Western civilization and the cultural tradition that goes back to the ancient Romans and Greeks. This background cannot simply be neglected. We do not argue for a literary criticism based on an interpretive *tabula rasa* here. But at the same time, we should never lose sight of the fact that all we use is a particular system of pattern-building, a specific tradition of creating meaning *among many others* so that the greatest sin we can commit is what we would like to call the ontological fallacy and ascribe universal truth value to our literary judgments.¹⁰ So the categories and evaluations of our cultural tradition are as valuable and as valid in the ethical negotiation of frameworks and points of view as those of any other such tradition.

Subjectivity, Particularity, and Inevitable Positionality

But once again we have to qualify what has just been said by pointing out that this does not mean that we should forever remain in the space in between various interpretations or evaluations since we have become aware of their being conditioned by their respective limited horizons. This is where we have to criticize much of postmodern and post-structuralist thought. For it is no coincidence that the notion of the subject, which is a central prerequisite to the possibility of evaluation, has become so problematical in recent years, with talk about the decentering of the subject threatening the existence of the concept as such. Post-structuralist thought has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of what constitutes a subject in as far as it has rendered untenable the idea of the unified subject of the Cartesian "Cogito, ergo sum". But at the same time this must not amount to the complete dissolution of the notion of the subject as such. The subject has become a plural one in as far as it can often be seen to be fragmented, inconsistent, of great inner heterogeneity and at the focal point of many external influences, as the work of Nietzsche, Freud, Bakhtin, Levinas and others has

¹⁰ Schücking, in his essay "Literaturgeschichte und Geschmacksgeschichte", published in 1948, already pointed out that the artistic content or value of a work of art cannot have any objective or universal validity when he wrote: "[...] so nahe uns immer wieder der Gedanke liegt, den künstlerischen Gehalt zum Maßstab zu machen, so müssen wir uns doch immer wieder sagen, daß sich künstlerischer Gehalt nicht wie Goldgehalt experimentell nachweisen läßt. Es bleibt also nur möglich, von dem Gesichtspunkt auszugehen, den der Charakter der Literaturgeschichte als ein Teil der Kulturgeschichte, als ein Bestandteil des jeweiligen geistigen Gehalts der Vergangenheit an die Hand gibt" (362).

shown. The self-sufficient, homogeneous and absolutely autonomous subject is dead. But this does not mean that the idea of the subject as such has also dissolved into a void. For even though we are all characterized by the above-mentioned pluridimensionality and situatedness in a web of outside effects on us, in each individual case our multiplicity is a particular one (cf. Gibson 15) and makes us different from the others so that the notion of the subject can still be saved after all, even in our postmodern times. Moreover, this is a condition of the ethical in the intersubjective and communicative sense it is understood here. For, as Richard Taylor has pointed out with reference to Wilhelm von Humboldt, "the very notion of a conversation requires a recognition of individual speakers and their different perspectives" (525, fn. 12). Consequently, Taylor severely criticizes poststructuralists and points out that their "discussions of the end of subjectivity and the impossibility of lucid consciousness [...] fundamentally misunderstand the nature of language" (524, fn. 8). In order to be able to pursue the ethical exchange of various characters' horizons, frameworks or explanatory patterns, we cannot hover in a region of unspecific non-subjects with borders the fuzziness of which has all but dissolved them and no longer allows for taking a stand. In order to be able to communicate we take on the semblance of the unity of a character in a story, for a message can only be sent by and from a distinct sender rather than from a dispersed nonentity. However, the latter vision has never been more than an intellectual chimera which results from too rigid and too far-reaching an interpretation of our becoming aware of the relative conditionality of our subjectivity. Loss of absolute autonomy in this context does mean greater openness towards the contingency we are surrounded by and part of, but it does not mean entropic dissolution into unspecific and unlocalizable non-entity. Moreover, it is due to our anthropological set-up as pattern-building animals that we cannot escape from thinking of ourselves in terms of units we call subjects. The fact that these can no longer be monadologically closed off from the world but are wide open to it cannot change that fundamental fact.

This insistence on the existence of the subject no matter how decentered it may be also entails our being caught up in what we will call the inescapability of particularity. We can be ever so open to the other, to difference and to what transcends our horizon, but in the end we will always come down to the inevitable positionality of a particular stand that is inextricably linked to our subjectivity. In our pattern-building processes, we are always caught up between the drive toward generalization and the inescapability of peculiarity and specificity. We may reach a consensus on a certain general rule or convention of reading within a relatively wide group of readers, for example, but the interpretations of that group will nevertheless constitute the particularity of that specific interpretive community. Even the insistence on the most general and universal of abstractions equals a concrete and particular position and says what it says rather than its opposite. Saying that there can never be any closure also *is* closure of a kind. As Richard Bernstein has recently pointed out, this applies even to Derrida's deconstruction: "Derrida knows all too well that there is no ethics or politics - or even meta-ethics or meta-politics without 'taking a position'" (191).

The particularity we are talking about here also comes about because of the fact that we are always bound up in a cultural context and tradition that make our position a distinct one. Since we as subjects only exist by constituting our selves within contingent space by structuring the latter and thereby introducing categories like that of the good, the notion of particularity cannot be separated from that of ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre has shown "that all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion" (126f.). It is because of this that our reading of literature is an essentially ethical undertaking since it is always the particular that we are confronted with in literary texts, be it the particular horizons of author or narrator, be it the particular circumstances of life in a specific context or the particular views on art implied by a poem, a novel or a drama. "The poet is no theorist; he offers no general formulas" (128), as MacIntyre sums up this feature of literature.

The importance of the particular in ethical thought has already been discovered by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he defines *phronesis*, i.e. the exercise of judgment in particular cases, as one of the central virtues. If we do not want to fall into complete silence and the isolation this would bring with it, we always have to accept the particularity of our own lives and positions as well as that of others. For it is such particularity that provides the basis of communication, the concrete platform from which we can launch our forays into the realm of the other and compare and evaluate various horizons. Richard Rorty said ironically that "[w]e have become so open-minded that our brains have fallen out" (*Objectivism*, 203). But in trying to avoid the centripetal forces of false essentialisms, we should not succumb to the centrifugal forces of a dissolution of all positionality as such. Therefore we should not be afraid of taking a particular view but rather consider it an ethical imperative to do so. Wayne C. Booth says: "Total openness is total entropy - and hence total apathy for a reader" ("Narrative Choices" 67).

Consequently, we need to use determinate positions in order not to drift into the passive impotence of a contingency we no longer have any means of dealing with. However, we have to give reasons for our personal choices, and we also have to lay open before our communicative partners the horizon that informed these reasons so that they can judge them. As Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, "[...] it is in moving forward from [...] particularity that the search for the good, the universal, consists. Yet particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated" (221).

The Rehabilitation of Truth, Teleology, and Universalism as Catalytic Tools

After all that has been said so far, it may come as a surprise when we say that in spite of the ethical necessity of particularity and contingency, the notions of universality, truth, and teleology have not become useless, but can still fulfil an important function. For why, we could ask, should we seek an ethical exchange with the other if there is no hope of ever reaching the final *telos* or of finding universal Truth? If I am bound to remain caught up forever in the "limited determinacy" (Booth, *Company* 64) of the particular and the relative, why should I not give up, stop looking for the non-me, and finally accept that "anything goes" without bothering any more? This is where the utility

of teleology and universalism as epistemological and ethical tools comes in. For we have to avoid the intellectual stasis of subscribing to any one explanatory pattern, to any one way of looking at the world and then stop seeking alternative descriptions and models by declaring our point of view the Truth. If we compare the contingent multiplicity of frameworks, interpretations or world views with an immense building with an infinite number of rooms, we can say that we may well rent a flat in that building for a certain period of time. Indeed, we have to do so if we want to have an intellectual as well as psychological abode at all. What we must not do, however, is rent any particular apartment and then pull down all the blinds and throw away the keys. Instead, we always have to go out and look at other flats, compare them with our own and take the risk of suddenly finding out that we had better move. We should never rest permanently and cease to be on an intellectual quest. And, as MacIntyre affirms, there can be no quest without a conception of a *telos*. Even if *the good*, the final *telos* with universal validity cannot be defined or reached, this does not mean that the quest for it is necessarily meaningless (Booth, *Company* 219). For we need what Richard Rorty calls a "*focus imaginarius*" (*Contingency* 195), the notion of absolute truth or ultimate reality, the idea of an all-embracing good about which we can all reach a consensus, even though we know about its unreachability and its purely heuristic and fictional character. Consequently, "*a focus imaginarius* is none the worse for being an invention" (*Contingency* 196). What we end up with then are temporary and provisional teleologies that have to be renegotiated all the time, we live and interpret texts and the world as megatext according to the aims and truths of what Donald Davidson calls passing theories (*passim*). Without this at least imagined "pathos of finitude" (Rorty, *Contingency* 42), many of us would find it too hard to live up to the ethical imperative and continue the quest for the ultimately unattainable that keeps us from reverting into intellectual and moral lethargy. A believer in any one of the old teleologies and universalisms may very well complain about this being an act of self-deception. We prefer to look at it as a legitimate and necessary act of bridging the already mentioned gap between our anthropological set-up¹¹ and the contingency of the world and at the same time of enabling us to fulfil the demands of the ethical. Julian Barnes, in the "Parenthesis" between the eighth and ninth chapters of *A History of the World in 10¹/₂ Chapters* (1989), has described the dilemma we find ourselves in and the necessity of the notion of truth as a tool:

We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what 'really' happened. This God-eyed version is a fake - a charming, impossible fake [...]. But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so, because if we don't we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar's version as much as another liar's, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth. (245f.)

¹¹ Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* already takes man to be in need of the concept of a *telos*.

Barnes here demonstrates that we need the notion of truth, but at the same time his play with percentages shows that those who insist on the absolute truth value of their interpretive models because they are not willing to give up moral ontology ought to practice greater modesty in their metaphysical aspirations and needs. Like Rorty's liberal ironist, they should accept that the constructed character of their beliefs does not necessarily invalidate them. As Joseph Schumpeter said: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" (quoted in Berlin 172).

So we agree with Martha Nussbaum, who also sees the problems of universalism, teleology and the relative validity of all the various traditions or cultural patterns and nevertheless recommends that we remain "undeterred, in our neediness, by the messiness of that enterprise" (*Love's Knowledge* 28)¹².

In this context, we have to deal with J. Hillis Miller's ethics of reading, because on the one hand Miller still subscribes to a form of Kantian universalism and presupposes the existence of "the moral law as such" (*The Ethics of Reading* 22) and consequently subscribes to a concept of universalism, but on the other hand he is aware of the unattainability of that law and situates narrative "within the space of a perpetual deferral or direct confrontation of the law" (25) and thereby renders the notion of teleology problematic. Miller is not all that far from our notion of a catalytic telic fiction. But he does not come to the same conclusion of the multiple and dynamic ethical plurivocity we advocate. Instead, he tries to monologize his ethics of reading by considering the existence of heterogeneous incompatible readings as examples of the ultimate unreadability of any text and therefore gives the following recommendation: "Withdraw. Abnegate. Give up. Get out of the vicious circle. I must respond to the linguistic imperative which is the true ethics of reading" ("Is There an Ethics" 99).

It is here that Miller's model differs from ours. We share his opinion that what he calls the law can never be reached, but we cannot follow his suggestion to give up, recognize the unreadability of the text *and then leave it at that*. Nor can we accept that demonstrating a text's unreadability is all we can do and all that characterizes a good reader (cf. Miller, "Is There an Ethics" 100). If we follow Miller's approach, the result of any interpretation is a foregone conclusion, and we doubt whether that *would* be worth the effort. Together with Miller, we appreciate the value of Paul de Man's dictum that "Reading [...] bars access, once and forever, to a meaning that can never cease to call out for its understanding" (77).¹³ But we disagree with Miller when it comes to the consequences of that realization. For we fear that Miller's celebration of unreadability may all too easily lead to a denial of the ongoing ethical conversation about partial and particular positions we advocate. It may also point the direction to a reading around most parts of a literary text through a concentration on one or two small bits of text that serve as a peg for the search for unreadability, a technique that more than one deconstructionist reading is guilty of. Miller's position thereby, though negating any kind of semantic closure, may paradoxically lead to another kind of closure on a communicative level. As

¹² Charles Taylor has a similar point to make when he writes: "So articulating the good is very difficult and problematic for us. Is that a reason for eschewing it?" (96).

¹³ Cf. Miller, *Ethics of Reading* 47.

imperfect, temporary and in need of renegotiation as our explanatory patterns may be, we must *not* give up and have to carry on the ethical process of coduction with the text and with each other in all its complexity.

The Charges of Subjectivism, Relativism, and Irrationality

We have to deal with three possible objections here. For one might argue that our position as described above is guilty of subjectivism, relativism, and irrationality. The charge of subjectivism can be refuted by referring to Hilary Putnam, who has shown that values can be both subjective and objective at the same time (154). For it is an objective fact that F.R. Leavis preferred Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad to Lawrence Sterne and Thomas Hardy, although the preference itself was subjective. When we take into account our own subjectivity in reading, then, we only provide further evidence for the objective dependence of our frameworks on our social, political, cultural, etc. contexts. We do not feel attacked, therefore, when we are accused of subjectivism, because this does not exclude objectivity. Rather, it simply saves us from essentialist simplifications posing as objective truth. We do not embrace the absolute subjectivism of an arbitrary individual choice without any recourse to rational means, what MacIntyre has called "emotivism" (11), but neither do we ignore all the variables that influence our pattern-building processes, that differ from subject to subject and that lead to a multiplicity of judgments. The latter, as Wayne C. Booth has emphasized, is indicative of rationality rather than its opposite:

[...] variability of judgment, far from indicating mere subjectivity or non-rationality, is the very mark of rationality. Since what we are calling achievements are in themselves unpredictably various, requiring both in their makers and their receivers widely varying training and skills, we should not only expect but welcome variety of appraisal. (*Company* 97f.)¹⁴

Consensus, Incommensurability, and Conflict

In spite of all the evaluative variety mentioned by Booth we should always carry on our coductions or hermeneutic conversations and compare our frameworks and interpretations in order to see whether we cannot overcome the differences and reach a new consensus. This attempt at creating an ever enlarging interpretive community that would theoretically become a universal one in the end is the reflex of the telic presuppositions we have shown to be both an illusion and a valuable tool that has a

¹⁴ Martha Nussbaum provides a defence against the charge of irrationality from a slightly different angle when she points out that our taking a particular even though possibly only temporal position is a rational process: "The Aristotelian procedure tells us to be respectful of difference [...] It is built into the procedure itself that we will not simply stop at an enumeration of differences and with the verdict that we cannot fairly compare, cannot rationally decide. It instructs us to do what we can to compare and choose as best we can, in the knowledge that no comparison is, perhaps, altogether above somebody's reproach [...]" (*Love's Knowledge* 28).

catalytic effect on keeping our ethical undertaking going by providing ever new impulses for it. However, since the idea of the ultimate interpretive community of universal consensus must remain an idealistic and ultimately a boring¹⁵ dream and since it is highly likely that we will reach the limits of compromise and mediation long before we even come near such a metalevel, we will have to rethink our attitude towards the notion of consensus. Within our model of the ethics of criticism, consensus is not an essential aim. It is merely one possible outcome of our intersubjective plurivocal ethical exchanges, but nothing to be bought at no matter what price. We must become aware of the possibility of the incommensurability of evaluations and interpretations, which, because of the inevitable particularity of our horizons, is a highly probable outcome of our coductions as well as an everyday occurrence today. Alasdair MacIntyre has drawn our attention to the "interminable character" of "contemporary moral utterance"(6) and sees "the conceptual incommensurability of the rival arguments" (8) as one characteristic quality of such a state.¹⁶ More often than not, then, we are faced with conflicting interpretations or explanatory patterns which cannot easily be reconciled with each other although they do not thereby invalidate each other. They are simply different ways of looking at the same text. We can find them more convincing or less persuasive, but often we will find all of them valid in their own terms although they cannot be brought together.¹⁷ We will have to learn to live with conflict, then, and cannot rely on the ubiquitous possibility of consensus through a fusion of horizons or some other method of transcending difference. This, however, is an integral part of the ethics of criticism, which cannot exclude pluralism as a tenable procedure. Neo-Aristotelians such as Alasdair MacIntyre do not like such a position, as becomes clear from MacIntyre's slightly ironic tone in the following statement: "In the domain of fact there are procedures for eliminating disagreement; in that of morals the ultimacy of disagreement is dignified by the title 'pluralism'"(32).

As becomes clear towards the end of his book, MacIntyre aspires to a transcendent unified good after all (202f.), but we can only accept this as the application of the catalytic tool of a telic fiction described above rather than as a claim of moral ontology that would render pluralism impossible.

We would like to suggest here that it is as important in the ethics of criticism to deal with conflict as with consensus. The latter implies the danger of stasis and intellectual ossification, since the other, by reaching a consensus with me, has ceased to be an other so that an ethical exchange in the sense we have defined above has become impossible. We have to seek out conflict not as a hostile confrontation, but as an important engine that drives our renegotiations of intellectual positions forward and prevents them from becoming entrenched ones. We should not forget here that the ancient Greeks who heard Homer's epics considered the *agon* or 'contest' as the kernel of morality (MacIntyre 137) and that this is also what we are confronted with in Greek drama and

¹⁵ Booth blandly say: "[...] without conflict, no event" (*Company* 364) and thereby supports this evaluation.

¹⁶ Cf. also Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 36f.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor also acknowledges the existence of a "diversity of goods for which a valid claim can be made. The goods may be in conflict, but for all that they don't refute each other" (502).

philosophical dialogue (MacIntyre 138).¹⁸ In order to be able to act and not to be lost either in constant ineffectual debate or, alternatively, in war, we sometimes have to reach temporary consensus at a particular point in time, just as we have to take a particular position at the moment when communicative exchange is about to happen.¹⁹ But we would like to point out with Donald Davidson that all we can do and should do is "to converge on passing theories"(446) rather than to subscribe to what we permanently agree on calling eternal truth. Our model is a conflictual one in a positive but uncomfortable sense. Not only do we need the conflict of different frameworks²⁰ to keep us from abandoning ethical dialogues and from subscribing to the snug and cosy comforts of foundational fallacies, but we also have to learn how to live with difference and incommensurability and not make war by ceasing to communicate, by using slander, or by trying to impose our own views with the help of power and force or by establishing critical orthodoxies that must no longer be questioned. We must accept the incompleteness of our interpretive efforts which can only remain ethical if we avoid permanent closure. We can have the dynamics of an infinite succession of static stages, like the steps of an ever-spiralling staircase. The staircase may even have landings where we can and need to rest for some time before we look out for the other and go on to the next floor. But we should not stay on a landing forever and adopt it as our permanent intellectual platform. We have to learn to accept that it is not a bad thing to have different people on different landings at different moments and that we do not *have to* agree on the aesthetic value, say, of a literary work of art. We agree with Wayne C. Booth here, who also points out the independence of the concepts of evaluation and consensus: "[...] the worth of any project in ethical criticism in no way depends on our ability to come to consensus on any one ethical appraisal or to produce a single harmonious scheme of narrative values" (*Company* 207).

We consider what Martha Nussbaum has called the "dynamic tension between two possible irreconcilable visions" (*Love's Knowledge* 82) to be much more fertile than a state in which a single vision dominates critical discourse and condemns it to ultimate stasis. We believe therefore with Gerald Graff that to "[t]each the conflicts" connected with ways of looking at literature or at the world in general is of much greater importance than simply teaching what we consider critical orthodoxies and then leave it at that. There is a negotiational imperative that forbids such a reductionist procedure. Any general rule can only be a convention within an interpretive community. This convention must in principle always be subject to renegotiation.

The Ethics of Criticism and Why Literature Matters

After all that has been said so far, we think it is obvious that literature, the act of reading and literary criticism are highly relevant to our conception of ethics and vice versa. Literature provides us with the narrative structures that are a primary tool of the

¹⁸ We must not overgeneralize here, however, since later, for Plato, "conflict and virtue are mutually incompatible and exclusive" (MacIntyre 141).

¹⁹ Cf. Booth, *Company* 345 on the concept of partial truth.

²⁰ Taylor also talks about "the need to recognize a plurality of goods, and hence often of conflicts" (518).

ethical life. The narratives we are confronted with in literary texts present us with an other, with different horizons that defamiliarize the known to us and thus shake us out of the somnolent intellectual complacency we may have retired into. They engage us in a process of negotiation and renegotiation of old and new patterns and interpretations and thus make us aware of new ways of looking as well as of our ways of making sense of the contingent world and of constructing moral norms within interpretive communities. Literary texts are "a bit of 'frozen' potential communication" (Taylor 526, fn. 15)²¹ and thus involve us in an intersubjective dialogue and fulfil the definition of art in the words of Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi:

[...] Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. (ll. 304-306)

Moreover, literature embodies and presents what Martha Nussbaum has called "the importance of complex particularity" (*Love's Knowledge* 23) in as far as it makes one perceive the heterogeneous particularity of specific situations (37) and thereby fosters "a commitment to qualitative distinctions" (36) in us that saves us from subscribing too quickly to general rules and from losing an awareness of their relative conditionality. What is needed in literary criticism, therefore, is an "ethical irony" (Handwerk, *passim*) which makes us aware of the impossibility of constituting an over-arching pattern of coherence that provides us with the correct interpretation. Literature pays attention to contingent detail and provides us with what Clifford Geertz has called thick descriptions (3ff.) and the cultural situatedness of actions and feelings.²² Literature confronts us with the inevitable positionality without which there can be no communication and induces us to develop positions of our own so that we can take part in the ethical process of co-duction. It is in literary texts that we encounter the particularity we have shown to be of such importance to the ethical project. As Wayne C. Booth has pointed out, this is an essential aspect for any practitioner of the ethics of criticism:

What should interest any ethical critic is the lived experience of stories as told or read. We never experience a technique separate from the human materials it enables us to bring to life. [...] We always experience [...] particular techniques as *this particular narrator exercising this particular degree of moral, intellectual, or pragmatic insight, privileged knowledge, or authority over these particular characters and events.* ("Narrative Choices 73)

Literature educates us to perceive the other in all his/her particularity and to give him/her an open and unprejudiced appraisal. This competence of dealing with alterity we consider a great good that is needed more than ever in a multicultural world that offers distinct experiences of otherness all the time. But we do not only have to seek out the

²¹ The relevance of Bakhtinian dialogics is obvious in this context, but cannot be discussed in the space available here.

²² On the importance of thick descriptions to literature and ethics cf. Rorty, *Contingency* 94 and Taylor 80.

particularity of the other. We also should and have a right to form our own. As ethical critics we must take a stand and develop our individual reactions to literary texts as works of art. We should evaluate and then negotiate our evaluations with those of others. But evaluating a literary text to the ethical critic cannot simply mean calling a book good or bad or trying to put several works of literature in a hierarchical order. Such procedures more often than not are nothing than crude implementations of more or less conscious subjective frameworks that frequently bar the way to fruitful hermeneutic exchanges because they do not do justice to the complex particularities and the heterogeneous quality of the books concerned. Such cannot be our aim. Richard Rorty demonstrated the uselessness of such an undertaking by comparing five novelists and philosophers. His result does not amount to a hierarchical order of better or worse writers, but it ends with the following statement:

Different writers want to do different things. Proust wanted autonomy and beauty; Nietzsche and Heidegger wanted autonomy and sublimity; Nabokov wanted beauty and self-preservation; Orwell wanted to be of use to people who were suffering. They all succeeded. Each of them was brilliantly, *equally*, successful. (*Contingency* 170)

This is an example of ethical criticism not because Rorty calls all his five writers successful, but because he avoids lumping them together and judging them all against one single norm. Ethical criticism acknowledges the specific qualities of a text and implies a description of these qualities. The implicit norms we find in a text - and it is by no means certain that different readers will find the same norms in the same text - will have to inform our interpretations,²³ which, in their turn, will have to face up to being measured as to how they can stand comparison with other interpretations. The process of going back to the text and of re-interpreting it that is thereby initiated is one without an end. The ethical critic therefore is wary of simply saying "A is a better writer than B," although s/he may well have certain personal preferences which s/he is willing to discuss and renegotiate with other readers. For, as Booth has shown,

there is surely not one supreme quality that all good art - and therefore all good narratives - should aspire to. [...] if we must have a universal, let us make it the value of experiencing *many* good kinds of narrative, each kind marked by quite different combinations of good qualities, some in seeming conflict with other good things, and some perhaps in other contexts decidedly harmful. (*Company* 56)

The ethical critic, then, is notoriously cautious about the implied authority of canons which he will always be trying to revise. This is no contradiction to being aware of the existence of received canons within particular interpretive communities and of the necessity of being informed about these traditions as facts of the history of reception. But the ethical critic is also very conscious of the multiplicity of such communities and traditions and therefore an intercultural reader. S/he would like to do without canons and

²³ Cf. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*: "In the reading of a literary text, there is a standard of correctness set by the author's sense of life, as it finds its way into the work" (9).

read everything, but since that is not possible s/he is always on the look-out for possible revisions of the existing canons.

The ethics of criticism as we have outlined them here point in the direction of a new humanism that has learnt some of the lessons of post-structuralism without carrying their consequences too far. We think that this is important for the future of literary studies as an academic subject because the latter has to avoid the fallacies of some of its older paradigms but at the same time should be careful not to deconstruct itself out of existence and lose any convincing *raison d'etre*. Rather, literature and literary criticism should be perceived in their political dimension as ways of human cultural endeavour that allow us to steer away from both fundamentalisms and arbitrariness and move in the direction of the peaceful recognition of our plurality which Amartya Sen considers to be the best prospect for peace.

Works Cited

- Antor, Heinz. "Ethical Plurivocity, or: The Pleasures and Rewards of Reading". in *Text - Culture - Reception: Cross-Cultural Aspects of English Studies*. Ed. Rüdiger Ahrens and Heinz Antor. Heidelberg: Winter, 1992, 27-46. Print.
- Barnes, Julian. *A History of the World in 10¹/₂ Chapters*. London: Picador, 1990. Print.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969. Print.
- Bernstein, Richard J. *The New Constellation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992. Print.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.
- . "Are Narrative Choices Subject to Ethical Criticism?". *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*. Ed. James Phelan. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989. 57-78. Print.
- Bredella, Lothar. "Understanding a Foreign Culture Through Assimilation and Accommodation: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Its Dual Historical Context". *Text - Culture - Reception. Cross-Cultural Aspects of English Studies*. Ed. Rüdiger Ahrens and Heinz Antor. Heidelberg: Winter, 1992. 475-521. Print.
- Carey, John. "An End to Evaluation". *Times Literary Supplement* 22 February 1980: 204. Print.
- . *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*. London: Faber, 1981. Print.
- Davidson, Donald. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"., *Truth and Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Ed. Ernest Lepore. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. 433-446. Print.
- de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958. Print.
- Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1986. Print.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana, 1993. Print.

- Gibson, Andrew. *Reading Narrative Discourse: Studies in the Novel from Cervantes to Beckett*. London: Macmillan, 1990. Print.
- Graff, Gerald. "Teach the Conflicts". *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89:1 (1990): 51-67. Print.
- Gras, Vernon W. "The Recent Ethical Turn in Literary Studies." *Mitteilungen des Verbandes Deutscher Anglisten* 4:2 (1993): 30-41. Print.
- Handwerk, Gary J. *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985. Print.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Print.
- Jauß, Hans Robert. *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970. Print.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth, 2nd ed. 1985. Print.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. Print.
- . "Is There an Ethics of Reading?". *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*. Ed. James Phelan. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989. 79-101. Print.
- Moore, George Edward. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Print.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory". *The Future of Literary Theory*. Ed. Ralph Cohen. New York/London: Routledge, 1989. 58-85. Print.
- . *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.
- Putnam, Hilary. *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Print.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Print.
- . *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Print.
- Schlesinger, I.M. "Production of Utterance and Language Acquisition". *The Ontogenesis of Grammar*. Ed. Dan I. Slobin. New York: Academic Press, 1971. 63-101. Print.
- Schücking, Levin Ludwig. *Essays über Shakespeare, Pepys, Rossetti, Shaw und anderes*. Wiesbaden: Dieterich, 1948. 359-387.
- Sen, Amartya. *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. London: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Print.