

Literature and Ethics

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LITERATURE AND ETHICS: FROM THE GREEN KNIGHT TO THE DARK KNIGHT

Editors: Steve Brie and William T. Rossiter

Literature and Ethics:
From the Green Knight to the Dark Knight

Edited by

Steve Brie and William T. Rossiter

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P U B L I S H I N G

Literature and Ethics: From the Green Knight to the Dark Knight,
Edited by Steve Brie and William T. Rossiter

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In memory of Katie Elizabeth Edge

What was it about her that without her
The world grew dull?
(Brian Patten, “Her Ghost”)

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INTRODUCTION: “DISTINCT AND SEPARATE”?

STEVE BRIE AND WILLIAM T. ROSSITER

Writing to the *St James Gazette* on 25 June 1890 in response to a review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde claimed that “[t]he sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate” (Beckson, 1974: 67). The essays in the present volume refute this assertion in their examination of the complex interrelationships which exist between literature and ethics. There have of course been previous studies of literature and ethics, but they have often been circumscribed in terms of their chronology and focus. Andrew Newton’s *Narrative Ethics* (1995) is a highly informative book but limited to narrative, whereas the present volume also incorporates poetry and the graphic novel, amongst other forms. Also, in terms of chronology, Newton’s book is restricted to the nineteenth century and beyond. Likewise, Hadfield, Rainsford and Woods’ *The Ethics in Literature* (1999), with a few exceptions, focuses primarily upon the twentieth century.¹ The present volume spans the entire history of English literature. The volume edited by Adamson, Freadman and Parker, *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory* (1998), whilst illuminating, does not focus upon literature alone, and as such may be seen to have too wide a remit for the undergraduate literature scholar, at whom the present volume is pitched. Louis P. Pojman and Lewis Vaughn’s *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (1999) is useful and reliable as an anthology of literary and philosophical texts, but it is nevertheless an anthology, as is *The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics through Literature* (2004), edited by Peter and Renata Singer.

Whilst the present volume is primarily aimed at an undergraduate readership, the intellectual rigour of the essays, and their impact upon contemporary research, guarantees that the volume will appeal to a wider academic readership. The scholars who have contributed to this volume are established or ascendant figures in their respective fields. These fields are sufficiently varied in their scope to enable an interdisciplinary

approach without losing focus upon the relationship between literature and ethics.

This focus is predicated upon a very basic question: does reading literature make one a better person? The fact that this question is so simple has the converse effect of making it very difficult to answer, as it is littered with variables. In the first instance, the term “literature” needs refining—what kinds of literature are we talking about? The Classics? *Heat* magazine or *National Enquirer*? Or the “best that has been thought and said in the world”, as Matthew Arnold (1932: 6) once posited? Indeed, the term “literature” is fraught with connotations which could leave one stranded in a sea of post-structural relativity, or which would reignite the debate between highbrow and lowbrow, or fire up T. S. Eliot’s canon once more.² For the purpose of this volume, a provisional definition of literature has been adopted, referring to those works which either have held up consistently under critical examination, works which manage to convey the mindset of a given historical period, or more recent works which have managed to balance critical and popular acclaim. These definitions are far from perfect, but to prevent the discussion from collapsing into generality parameters are necessary.

The second variable is “better”, which might be understood as morally better. This necessitates a fixed definition of what constitutes being morally virtuous. However, ethical codes do not transcend their historical moment, but are produced by them. For example, the ethics discussed by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* are not the same codes and practices as those discussed by Kant in his *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, which are different again from Alan Badiou’s recent prescription, discussed below. Yet because ethical predicates change across time, it does not follow that there are no continuities. The same might be said for literature: literary tastes, styles and modes change, but some things—as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare—are “not of an age, but for all time” (Jonson, 1996: 264 [line 43]). There is the danger here of lapsing into New Critical liberal humanism, but this volume does not claim the existence of a temporally transcendent human nature, which is free from taint by such vulgar things as society, history, gender, race or class. In fact, this is the key to one of the problems this volume is addressing: can there exist a literary ethics—what might be termed an ethical hermeneutics—which comes after the radical relativism of postmodern literary theory, and which does not retreat back into the moral certainties of Leavisite liberal humanism, which privileged white, middle class, Western European and American male values?³ This question will be addressed below, and in

doing so return to the original question of whether reading literature makes us better people. Firstly, however, the volume's scope must be clarified.

The subtitle to the *Literature and Ethics* volume illustrates its chronology: *from the Green Knight to the Dark Knight*. The Green Knight refers to the central character in an anonymously authored fourteenth-century alliterative poem called *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This poem tells of how a giant Green Knight enters the court of King Arthur "upon Krystmasse" (Anderson, 1996: 168; line 37), and throws down a challenge to the brave and renowned Knights of the Round Table.⁴ If one of them would be so bold as to step forward and deliver a blow with an axe upon the Green Knight, then the Green Knight will return the blow in a "twelmonyth and a day" (*SGGK*, 298). The message is clear: the Green Knight is asking the court of Camelot to live up to the stories which have been told about it. However, none of the famous knights is brave enough to take the challenge.⁵ The implications for the court are dire; with its honour besmirched, the Round Table is morally redundant. A young, inexperienced figure named Gawain takes the honour of the Round Table upon his slender shoulders, a task which should have been fulfilled by a more experienced knight.⁶ Gawain strikes the blow, removing the Green Knight's head in the process. The Green Knight, however, calmly picks up his head, and tells Gawain that he must receive a return blow from the axe "at this tyme twelmonyth" (*SGGK*, 383), when Gawain has sought him out. Gawain thus takes on the responsibility for his society's honour. Camelot, which represents the ideal of medieval romance, is a community with its own ethical code. This chivalric code is predicated upon honour and duty. Gawain has been brought up to believe in that code—when it is threatened, he seeks to preserve it. In doing so he becomes a hero, but also an outcast; whilst others claim to honour the ethics of the chivalric code, it is he who transmutes ethical principles into moral conduct. The poem ends with Gawain being celebrated by the court, but feeling utterly alone: at the close of the poem it says that he "groned with gref and grame" (*SGGK*, 2502).⁷ This is the cost of his ethical actions.

Whilst the story of Gawain might seem removed from the figure who concludes the volume, the similarities between the modern and medieval texts are in fact multiple. Batman, the Dark Knight, like Gawain, preserves the ethical code of his community, the cost of which is his effective alienation from that community. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: The Killing Joke* are concerned with the ethical codes and moral conduct of a given society. Aristotle, whose concept of ethics is directly informed by the Greek *polis*, or more specifically the Athenian city-state, indirectly illustrates the point

that each community, each society, formulates its own ethical criteria, yet they rarely start from scratch. For example, Aristotle—like his teacher Plato—frequently uses Homer as an example in his writings, when the ethics of the Homeric poems are in many ways very different from those of the Athenian city-state. Homeric ethics are informed by functionality, what makes a good king, a good sailor, a good farmer. The ethics of the city-state, on the other hand, are concerned with what makes a good *person*, which is linked to the good of the whole society; a good person is a good citizen. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted:

The Homeric chieftain’s personal values, the values of the courageous, cunning, and aggressive king, are now, if exercised by the individual in the city-state, antisocial. [...] The social order in which his qualities were an essential part of a stable society has given way to one in which the same qualities are necessarily disruptive. [...] Different cities observe different customs and different laws. Does and should justice differ from city to city? Does justice hold only within a given community between citizens? Or should it hold also between cities? (MacIntyre, 1967: 11-12)

Ethical codes change not only between places but between times—the ethical codes which are enabled by and inform Gawain’s Camelot are not those which are enabled by and inform Batman’s Gotham City. Yet, the ethical practices within each community are similar—the way in which Batman acts is similar to the way in which Gawain acts. Both seek to preserve the code, despite its personal cost. As MacIntyre points out, “there are continuities as well as breaks in the history of moral concepts” (1967: 2).

In his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Alain Badiou argues that:

According to the way it is generally used today, the term ‘ethics’ relates above all to the domain of human rights, ‘the rights of man’—or, by derivation, the rights of living beings.

We are supposed to assume the existence of a universally recognizable human subject possessing ‘rights’ that are in some sense natural [...]. These rights are held to be self-evident, and the result of a wide consensus. ‘Ethics’ is a matter of busying ourselves with these rights, or making sure that they are respected. (Badiou, 2001: 5)

As Badiou’s tone suggests, he is not an advocate of this concept of ethics, for him it is “a vague way [...] backed up by official institutions”, which has “inspired a violently reactionary movement” (2001: 2-5).⁸ In response to this “vague way” Badiou posits “the enduring maxim of *singular*

processes [...] the destiny of *truths*, in the plural” (2001: 3). The problem Badiou has with this formulation of ethics is evident: it is predicated upon non-existent universal assumptions, such as an unchanging, one-size-fits-all human condition and a conviction that natural rights exist, without having to clarify in what they exist, and how. However, Badiou’s preference for “*truths*, in the plural” opens the door to complete moral relativism. Indeed, we are reminded of Bacon’s essay “Of Truth” (1625):

What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Certainly there be [those] that delight in giddiness, and count it a bondage to fix a belief; affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting. (Bacon, 1985: 61)

Unlike his French predecessor, Montaigne, Bacon believed in a fixed truth, although he perhaps uses the term in a circumscribed way—it roughly equates to keeping faith with others, as in late medieval *troth*⁹—and his definition of truth is predicated upon the availability of a universal Real: “truth is a naked and open daylight, that doth not show the masques and mummeries and triumphs of the world half so stately and daintily as candlelights” (Bacon, 1985: 61). Masques and mummeries are literary-dramatic forms, and Bacon notes in the same essay that poetry is a pleasurable lie. It is the purpose of this volume to establish the extent to which literature, far from being little more than a pleasurable untruth, establishes or illustrates ethical truths which are neither so relative as to render ethics redundant, nor which claim complete universality whilst being circumscribed *de facto* by the values of a privileged few. Literature, embedded in history, looks to “*truths*, in the plural”, without dissipating the value of those truths. The history of literature is the history of ethical codes as they are inscribed within the wider cultural moment.

These cultural moments are traced by *Literature and Ethics*. If there exists an ethical hermeneutics, informed by an inherent morality within the reading of literature, then it is intertextual, not the product of an individual work, but of what Hans Robert Jauss terms the reader’s *Erwartungshorizont*, or “horizon of expectations”, which is constructed out of the reader’s hermeneutic history (1982: 44). It is this intertextuality which perhaps distinguishes the post-postmodern study of literature and ethics: certain ethical codes and practices recur in literature because new works of literature are informed by their reading of older works of literature. Frank Miller might not have read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but he surely knew *The Lord of the Rings*, not to mention the earlier Batman incarnations. As such, *Literature and Ethics* considers not only how the

ethical considerations of texts are informed by the society and history in which they were produced, but also looks at how intertextuality enables continuity across chronological boundaries. As society changes so does its ethics, and those who hold dear the ethics of the previous shift are apt to defend their codes in the face of this change. It is in fact the continuities that are so often overlooked, yet which it is hoped will become apparent through a cursory outline of the chapters in the volume.

* * *

The volume opens with a chapter which emphasizes those continuities by means of a comparative discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*. Gillian Rudd, the author of the chapter, is a leading ecocritic who specializes in medieval and Victorian literature. As such, her chapter analyzes the eco-ethics of two works, written five hundred years apart, which stress the relationship between humanity and the environment. The second chapter, by Will Rossiter, is a discussion of Renaissance humanism and its claims that literature can make us better people. Beginning with the debate between Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and drawing upon Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, it proceeds to analyse late medieval and early modern defences of poetry and drama, before culminating in a discussion of Shakespeare’s repudiation of the belief that literature can foster a moral code in his play *Titus Andronicus*. The chapter’s emphasis upon literature and moral instruction highlights the thematic framework of the volume. Whilst *Literature and Ethics* is predicated upon the question of whether literature has the capacity to make one a morally better person, it is underpinned by three interrelated themes: instruction, judgment, and justice. These themes recur throughout the chapters in diverse manifestations. The two chapters which follow look at further aspects of Shakespearean morality. Unhae Langis examines Hamlet’s moral justification for revenge, and the fact that Hamlet’s moral code—which is informed by Aristotelian ethics—will not permit him simply to kill his uncle. In a heroic society, vengeance is fuelled by anger towards a violation of one’s honour. However, Hamlet, a student of (Christian) humanism, strives for moderation, the rational guidance of passions towards virtuous ends. Jim Casey widens this focus on Shakespearean ethics by exploring the ethical requirements of early modern bodies and the moral judgements tied to them. In Shakespeare’s plays, gendered bodies have ethical freight, foreign bodies have moral limitations, and deformed bodies have monstrous associations. By examining the

sociocultural expectations that were yoked to early modern bodies, postmodern readers may reassess Shakespeare's plays and re-examine assumptions regarding Elizabethan and Jacobean corporeality. Jim Daems' chapter continues the focus on gendered ethics by examining the prevalence of rape narratives as prologues to freedom in Milton's work, as a prompt for us to consider the ethics of violence in literature, and whether, as Stephanie Jed argues, rape narratives legitimize both republican laws and institutions as well as the conditions of sexual violence in Milton's thought. Li-Hui Tsai maintains the theme of gendered ethics, but transfers the focus from male to female authors. Her chapter on writing women's lives examines the complex relationship between literature and ethics in a wider historical and literary context: it explores, for instance, how women's life stories function as a method for a philosophical ethics among eighteenth-century and Romantic-era writers, critics and reviewers. This emphasis upon the Romantic era leads into Louis Markos's discussion of the dark side of Romantic inspiration; poetic inspiration, it is argued, is not automatically morally beneficent, but is neutral, and shaped by the recipient of that inspiration, as is shown by Coleridge's fragment, "Kubla Khan", and its paratext. In this neutrality, Romantic inspiration is akin to the moral goodness which is found in Renaissance humanist discussions of literature's moral effect being dependent upon disposition.

In his essay on Charles Dickens and human rights, Robert McParland discusses questions such as: can stories prompt us toward ethical reasoning, or perhaps encourage ethical conduct? Some critics argue that ethical judgments about stories are merely subjective opinion. So what can we say about literature's presumed salutary effects upon the reader? Drawing upon recent critical debate, the chapter shows how the readers of Dickens' time believed in Dickens' texts for their ethical power. This chapter is followed by Becky McLaughlin's response to the question of whether literature can teach us to be better people. For her, the answer is—resoundingly—yes. McLaughlin, drawing upon the writings of Sartre, conceives of reading as a *Passion* in the Christian sense of the word, a situation in which the reader freely assents to the tale being told, putting him or herself "into a state of passivity to obtain a certain transcendent affect by this sacrifice", a situation in which the reader takes responsibility for the world that s/he and the writer jointly create through a dialectical process involving production and revelation. Following this, Susan Fischer returns to the subject of gender in her discussion of intersectionality in contemporary women's fiction. Drawing upon feminist political and ethical discourses, contemporary women's fiction often envisions a more

just world. The chapter examines the kind of feminist ethics that emerges in contemporary women’s fiction and the extent to which such writing draws upon an ethics of intersectionality—the recognition of the non-hierarchical nature of oppression and the need to oppose it in all its forms—and presents the possibility of justice. The chapter by Lawrence Phillips which follows maintains the focus upon contemporary fiction by discussing ethical atavism in J. G. Ballard’s sub/urban nightmares. If broadly interpreted as a search of ‘the life worth living’ or ‘satisfaction’ rather than reductively as ‘good conduct’ or ‘virtue’, in the face of the persistent pressure of modern social spaces to constrain both physically and psychologically, the ethical ‘core’ of humanity seems to be placed before the reader for debate. Tantalisingly, Phillips argues, this also seems to be associated with the atavistic energies of revolution. In Ballard’s writing it is certainly the relentless pressure placed on the individual that releases the energy of revolution, but that energy seems to contain within it the equal potential for evil as well as release. Self-awareness or self-realisation seems to have been lost in the equation of modern society as Ballard reads it. The volume concludes with Steve Brie’s “Spandex Parables”, which examines justice, criminality and the ethics of vigilantism in Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s *Batman: The Killing Joke*. Utilising theoretical ideas developed by philosophers such as Althusser, Kant, Kierkegaard, Kohlberg, Mill, Nietzsche and Plato, this chapter will explore and interrogate the moral and ethical relationship between Batman and the Joker as documented in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke*. In analysing the underlying psychological context in which superheroes and supervillains such as Batman and the Joker operate, the chapter suggests that, in terms of moral and ethical contexts, there are as many similarities as there are differences between the two characters.

Underpinning the question of whether literature can make us better people is a debate concerning the meaning of a text, the extent to which that meaning is clear, and therefore fixed, and the degree to which the reader can access that meaning. Roland Barthes famously declared the Death of the Author back in the 1960s:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. [...] Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the

writing. [...] Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes, 1977: 146-48)

According to Barthes, the attempt to determine a specific, fixed meaning is futile; the creation of meaning is dependent upon the reader, not upon an Author-God, an omnipotent determiner of semantic parameters who declares that the text definitely means *this* and definitely *not* that. However, if meaning is not fixed then how can any text convey a moral message, given that the message of the text is entirely determined by the reader? The answer to this question lies in addressing Barthes's assertion that "[c]lassic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader", as this is simply not true.

The earliest work of literary criticism is *entirely* dependent upon the reader, or rather the audience (both terms in any case refer to the recipient of the text). Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, states that through pity and fear the audience of a tragedy will effect the proper purgation of those emotions through the process of *katharsis*. *Katharsis* is thus the *telos* of tragedy, its purpose. Classical tragedy cleanses us spiritually or emotionally by allowing us to feel pity and fear in their correct magnitude. By experiencing these emotions during the drama we give them an outlet; were we not to do this, those emotions might disturb our sense of well-being, and be expressed at an inappropriate time. To watch a tragedy, then, is to operate an emotional pressure valve: it does one good. And if it does one good, then one must consider what this good means.

As such, we have to ask ourselves if meaning is as impossible in practice as Barthes would have it be. We might debate the specifics, but overall an idea of what a text would appear to mean can become apparent. For example, the majority of English undergraduates do not read *King Lear* as a delightful romantic comedy, despite the fact that Barthes posits the possibility of such radical semantic discretion within each text. Barthes is of course basing his argument upon a radical indeterminacy which post-structural critics claim as being inherent within language as a semiotics. If meaning within such a semiotics is dependent upon the other elements which together constitute it, then ultimate meaning—the Logos—is endlessly deferred, in a process which Jacques Derrida (1976) called *différance*. Like jam in *Alice in Wonderland*, meaning is always tomorrow and yesterday, but never today.¹⁰ Yet language still *works*, for the most

part, as a means of communication; the individual word’s potential for ambiguity and misinterpretation still exists, but in general we do not read cat as meaning dog, and we do not mistake a raven for a writing desk. *Katharsis* can thus be effected.

It is worthwhile revisiting earlier models of interpretation in order to emphasize this point. In the medieval commentary tradition it was the job of the commentator to provide the exegesis or allegoresis of a given work, to decode, decipher, and clarify the meaning of the text. The post-structuralist argument claims that the commentator’s task is impossible, as no one ultimate meaning exists. Were this argument or *disputatio* to be placed before the medieval commentator, it is likely he would disagree, but would perhaps acknowledge the need for plurality of interpretation in determining meaning. A plurality of readings will produce a plurality of interpretations; the commentator, drawing upon previous commentaries upon the text, can identify common responses and thereby decipher what was called the *intentio auctoris*, the intention of the author, which has been described by A. J. Minnis:

Intentio auctoris (intentio scribentis). The intention of the author.

Here the commentator explained the didactic and edifying purpose of the author in producing the text in question. [...] there was rarely any attempt (at least, not until very late in the Middle Ages) to relate a person’s purpose in writing to his historical context, to describe an author’s personal prejudices, eccentricities and limitations. The commentators were more interested in relating the work to an abstract truth than in discovering the subjective goals and wishes of the individual author. The *intentio auctoris* [...] was considered more important than the medium through which the message was expressed. (Minnis, 1988: 20-21)

This concept of the *intentio auctoris* would of course be dismissed by Barthes as the theological meaning of the Author-God; it is not impossible to ascertain, but the idea that meaning is limited to such an intention is anathema to post-structuralist sensibility. However, Minnis notes that the *intentio auctoris* is linked to an “abstract truth” rather than “the subjective goals and wishes of the individual author”. The author is a conduit for meaning, not a semantic arbiter—in other words, the medieval author is not the Author-God.¹¹ Umberto Eco (1992) has identified two further intentions: the *intentio lectoris* and the *intentio operis*. The *intentio lectoris* is the intention of the reader, which corresponds with Barthes’s concept of the birth of the reader (1997: 148). This, however, despite the reader’s intention being determined in part by what Stanley Fish (1990) called interpretive communities, smacks too much of solipsism, or what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley termed the affective fallacy (1972

[1949]). For example, one might be convinced that the sky is green, but that does not make it so, no matter how deeply that conviction is held.¹² The *intentio operis* is more interesting, as this is the intention of the work itself, and is “what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an original underlying signification system [...]. The text’s intention is not displayed by the textual surface” (Eco, 1992: 64). This intention might not correspond with that of the author or that of the reader, but is produced textually, contextually and intertextually, by the text pointing to itself (“its textual coherence”) and elsewhere, beyond itself (“an original underlying signification system”).

It is at this point, with the identification of *intentio operis*, that one can allow the ethical considerations of literature to re-emerge. Again, the previous school of criticism that founded its reading upon literature’s capacity for moral amelioration—those critics who subscribed to the ideas of F. R. Leavis—is now viewed with suspicion. In his popular guide to literary theory for undergraduates, *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry argues that one of “Leavis’s faults as a critic [...] [is that] his approach to literature is overwhelmingly moral; its purpose is to teach us about life, to transmit humane values” (2009: 16). The problem here is not necessarily that reading literature for moral lessons is wrong—although Barry’s tone suggests that it is distasteful—but that Leavis did not qualify or define his terms with sufficient precision: how does one define “life” or “humane values”? If all literature were concerned with a kind of moral didacticism then it would cease to teach through delight: we would find ourselves asking, like Alice, if everything must have a moral (Carroll, 2001: 94-6). Literature which serves primarily as a vehicle for the author’s implicit moral design upon us is rarely popular, and rarely read. In our present culture such designs are often met with suspicion, if not hostility, despite the popularity of self-help books and lifestyle gurus. The *intentio operis*, however, enables an ethical hermeneutics not based upon the views of the author or the ego of the reader, but which channels—through a fusion of text, context and intertext—the ethical code of the society in which it is produced; recalling that ethical codes do not remain static, but alter across time. The intention of the text is thus a means of gauging the ethical moment of the text’s production.

For example, were we to take a number of popular texts written in the same period—such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), the Harry Potter series (1997-2007), the Twilight novels (2005-2008), and Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003)—then we would be able to extrapolate the ethical code for early twenty-first century Britain and America, despite generic and qualitative difference. This code, on the

basis of these texts, would most likely consist of the rights of the individual, and the willingness to accept—and celebrate—cultural differences relative to mainstream normativity, without upsetting the *status quo* (it is the ethical model which Badiou inveighs against, in fact).¹³ These codes are not necessarily inscribed as deliberate moral lessons being taught by the author, but reveal the *intentio operis* as being produced by wider socio-political currents. What is also evident is the degree to which the ethical code which underpins these works is in fact very traditional, despite the different approaches of the texts. In Harry Potter we find recycled figures from Lewis Carroll, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis; all writers who engage with questions of individual and social morality. Zadie Smith frequently channels E. M. Forster.¹⁴ The Twilight novels extend the vampire tradition—itsself an industrial age’s fantasy of feudal order—to the emo and ME generation, whilst Mark Haddon’s novel takes its title from a Sherlock Holmes story. The meanings of each of these texts is produced intertextually and contextually, but without giving way to the radical semantic slippage which Barthes promulgated; each transposes traditional ethical concerns to the present day, without leaving us feeling overly “lectured” (and of course the word “lecture” in the modern idiom carries with it a wealth of negative associations).

Indeed, the inherent hostility towards moral guidance within popular culture entails that literary morality must operate in the same way as advertising—obliquely. The society which refuses to be told how to live its life, ironically, is told how to live its life much more than any previous generation—it is told by fashion designers, by car manufacturers, by supermarkets, by gossip magazines, by computer programmers, by the blogosphere, by social networking sites which interpret our online profiles and send us advertisements which reinforce what we believe to be true of ourselves. But we are not “lectured”, so it is ok. We read the hyperreal simulacra of modern life every single day and follow their ethical (or unethical) narratives, but they are not metanarratives, or grand narratives, as they are not explicit, nor do they seek to explain, rather they only represent: as Lyotard wrote, “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives [...] The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great goal” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). The hyperreal texts of post-postmodern culture represent (or misrepresent) ourselves to ourselves, they provide us with the texts of ourselves, which we can either refute or read as gospel.

What is indisputable is that texts need readers, as the reader is necessary for literature to be capable of effecting moral improvement. To address this point we might turn again to Aristotle, who stresses the

importance of personal disposition to ethics (Aristotle, 1976: 98). According to this view, the effect, and hence the meaning, of each text is made morally multiform in accordance with ethical hermeneutics, despite there being an ethical code which can be identified by reading a series of texts produced during the same historical moment. The *intentio operis* is not in competition with the *intentio lectoris* so much as it is with what we might term the *dispositio lectoris*—the disposition of the reader, which is, like the intention of the text, shaped by its socio-cultural context. The books by Smith, Rowling, Meyer and Haddon mentioned above all reinforce the *dispositio lectoris*, as they have been shaped by the same context, by what was once called the *zeitgeist* or the Spirit of the Age, or by Fish's interpretive community.

Why is this theoretical argument important? It is important because it is not theory for its own sake—quite the opposite. It is in fact an attempt to reassert reading as something which has practical application, as it had been for centuries. The study of literature is in danger of being made irrelevant precisely at a time when local book groups are oversubscribed and book sales are—we are repeatedly told—at an all time high. Whether hardline theorists like it or not, people tend to read for (a) escapism, for (b) a reinforcement of what they already know or enjoy, for (c) a kind of legitimized voyeurism, for (d) the opportunity to experience a different perspective, and finally (e) to learn something new.¹⁵ Each of these reasons is attended by an ethical consideration: (a) escapism implies something intolerable or displeasing about the reality of one's everyday life, we do not wish to escape from that which we enjoy (b) reinforcement of what one knows or enjoys suggests that what one knows or enjoys is somehow under threat (c) voyeurism has become deeply ingrained within our society, with the proliferation of CCTVs manifesting the panopticon of ideology (d) a different perspective presupposes a willingness to engage with others' opinions. Even (e), learning something new, carries with it the Aristotelian perspective that knowledge is intrinsically good. But there are other reasons too, there are organizations which arrange reading groups for people with depression or other mental illnesses, for people recovering from drug addiction and alcoholism, and it helps them to improve, or at least stave off the progression of the illness.¹⁶ This surely constitutes literature's 'impact'. If we allow the legacy of postmodern theory to persist in making all interpretation relative and thereby make meaning impossible or futile, then we run the risk of making the study of literature completely irrelevant at a time when people are hungrier than ever for the written word. Indeed, we run the risk of forgetting that joy which led to us reading books for a living, and of ignoring the fact that literature is one of

the main conduits for the ethical code of a society that is frequently accused of not having one.

Notes

¹ These exceptions are the essays by Ortwin de Graef, David P. Haney and Janis McLaren Caldwell, on Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, Coleridge and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, respectively.

² See Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” (1977: 113-38) for a discussion as to what one should include under the remit of literature. Foucault’s influence upon the expansion of what we consider to be literature has been considerable, notably in relation to new historicism.

³ These might be better termed moral uncertainties, if one recalls Leavis’s famous refusal to accept Rene Wellek’s challenge to define his critical terms (in the March 1937 edition of Leavis’s journal *Scrutiny*). The present volume does not reject theory either, far from it; see the fascinating discussion of theory and ethics by Becky McLaughlin.

⁴ Hereafter cited as *SGGK* and line number.

⁵ Arthur, through shame—“The blod schot for scham into his schyre face” (*SGGK*, 317)—accepts the challenge, but Gawain pleads that he be allowed to take it up (339-65).

⁶ However, the Green Knight claims that the knights are all adolescents: “Hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdles chylder” (*SGGK*, 280). J. R. R. Tolkien, who edited *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in 1925, and translated it into modern English later in his life, might have had this act of bravery and honour in mind when he had Frodo Baggins, a simple hobbit, take on the task of destroying the ring of power when the experienced Elves, Dwarves and Men of the Council of Elrond were not brave enough to do so in his work *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁷ Gawain feels foolish after being duped by Bertilak, who bears the true identity of the Green Knight, and his wife, who repeatedly attempts to seduce Gawain as a means of testing his chivalric honour.

⁸ Badiou makes it clear through his paraphrasing of the Declaration of Independence (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men were created equal”), that his view of the dominant modern concept of ethics is informed by what has been termed American cultural imperialism. Badiou sees modern ethics as characterized by what he terms “an immense ‘return to Kant’” (2001: 8). One might supplement this claim with a concomitant return to Rousseau (“Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains. [...] common liberty is a consequence of man’s nature” [Rousseau, 1968: 49-50]), or a return to Paine. However, Badiou’s obvious anti-American bias perhaps limits his conception of ethics.

⁹ See for example Chaucer’s “Truth”.

¹⁰ Carroll’s jam is a linguistic pun on the Latin adverb *iam* (which was often written with a descender on the first letter), which is used in the future and past tenses but is substituted by *nunc* in the present tense. See Carroll (2001: 206 n.3).

¹¹ Unsurprisingly, for the medieval commentator, God is the Author-God, the *deus artifex*, who makes the author a conduit for the abstract truth of which Minnis speaks.

¹² However, see *The Taming of the Shrew* (4.6).

¹³ As Peter Hallward writes in his Translator's Introduction to Badiou's *Ethics*, "nothing is more orthodox today than a generalized reverence for the other *qua* other" (Badiou, 2001: xxii).

¹⁴ See Smith (2003).

¹⁵ This is not conjecture; these are the most recurrent responses given by first-year undergraduate students to the question: 'why do we read books?'

¹⁶ See Blake Morrison's *Guardian* article (January 2008) on "The Reading Cure": <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/05/fiction.scienceandnature> [accessed 23 May 2010]

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“SUBSTITUTING EARTH FOR GOD”?
ETHICS AND THE RECOGNITION OF SPECIFIC
PLACE IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*
AND *THE SECRET GARDEN*

GILLIAN RUDD

In her essay on T. S. Eliot, Louise Glück asserts that “the impulse of our century has been to substitute earth for god as an object of reverence” (Glück, 1994: 21). The implication is that such substitution is possible, not because the two terms are synonymous, but because they now evoke similar combinations of response: “reverence” implies respect, awe, and the sense that the entity revered has the power to heal and to avenge, which further implies a right of judgement. Reverence is in turn an indication of ethical outlook, which confers on the revered being (god/earth) the role of touchstone: how we react, collectively and individually, is taken as an indicator of our moral worth. Those who cannot recognise the value of the revered object are not worthy, or not operating within the pertaining ethical systems, so the process indicates how we regard ourselves in relation to the object of reverence (god or earth) both as individuals and as species. Glück’s “impulse” then becomes a compulsion to prove ourselves, our identity and capabilities and so ensure our place in the world as species, but also as individuals within our communities. The texts discussed here offer in *Sir Gawain and Mary Lennox* two protagonists who enact precisely this complex process as they take it upon themselves to find and then enter specific locations. For Gawain that place is a “green chapel”, which he is bound to seek in fulfilment of a challenge issued to the whole of Arthur’s court by an anonymous Green Knight during one New Year’s festivities. In taking up that challenge Gawain also takes on the mantle of representative of Camelot and the codes it embodies. For Mary the place is the “secret garden” of the book’s title. In her case the quest seems more personal as this lonely girl seeks a “bit of earth” (70) to call her own, but as the book goes on her search for belonging becomes a healing process for the whole

household at Misslethwaite Manor. The direct encounters with the natural world (earth) experienced by these two protagonists probe the value systems of Camelot and Edwardian England, leaving readers reflecting on their own ethics as well as those upheld by the stories they have just read.

The anonymous poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* survives in one manuscript which was compiled around 1380; Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* was first published as a book in August 1911, having been serialised during the previous year in *The American Magazine*. Where *Sir Gawain* is a late medieval courtly romance whose audience is invited into the Arthurian world of knights, quests, tests and magical events, *The Secret Garden* offers its readership of American and British middle class families a tale of childhood loneliness and friendship set in contemporary Edwardian England. Such differences are immediately apparent; a moment's reflection makes the similarities just as evident. In *Gawain* and *Mary Lennox*, each text introduces a character with whom the audience readily identifies, regardless of how different each reader's actual experience may be. The series of events experienced by each protagonist tests and changes their characters, but also offers room for the reader to evaluate the codes of conduct which guide *Gawain* and *Mary's* actions. The quest motif which is explicit in *Sir Gawain* and sends *Gawain* off alone to find a green chapel to fulfil his bargain with the giant Green Knight who gate-crashed Arthur's Christmas at the start of the poem, is also present in *The Secret Garden*, as *Mary* is first isolated from her immediate family by an outbreak of cholera in India and then removed from India to England, where she finds herself again largely left to her own devices in Misselthwaite Manor, a large and isolated mansion set in the Yorkshire moors. There she takes it upon herself to discover the secret garden, the equivalent of *Gawain's* green chapel, in a way reminiscent of Wilson's study of the shared patterns of medieval romance and fairy stories (Wilson, 1976; 1983).

Further parallels are offered in the way each protagonist is initially overlooked by their community. *Gawain* may be Arthur's nephew, but when the poem opens there is no indication that he is a particularly significant member of Arthur's court. Indeed his request to be allowed to take up the Green Knight's challenge is based on the fact that he, *Gawain*, is not important, being in his words, the weakest, least clever and so most expendable of Arthur's knights (*SGGK* 354-55). *Mary Lennox* has been so peripheral in her initial community of English in India that she has been utterly forgotten during the outbreak of cholera which kills or scatters the entire household, leaving her an orphan. She is then sent “home” to her nearest relative, an uncle-in-law, where she finds herself equally marginalised

if not equally neglected in Misselthwaite Manor. For the reader, these two marginalised figures become representatives of their respective communities (for today's readers of their respective eras also) and the adventures that occur draw out not only the protagonists' individual characters but also reveal the kinds of character produced by the societies they represent.

It is significant that the places sought by Gawain and Mary are both revealed to be places where nature has taken its course. Although the terms "chapel" and "garden" both presuppose human construction, the function and indeed the magic of these two venues are rooted in their identities as places where human intervention has either been non-existent (the green chapel) or has long since been abandoned (the secret garden). Christianity provides the framework for both texts, but within that framework both texts also share a common reliance on an embedded belief in the restorative powers of the earth. This is clearly articulated in *The Secret Garden* as Mary frequently refers to the "Magic" which makes the bulbs send up shoots, the flowers bloom, and the leaves unfurl, and which also leads her to discovering the door to the secret garden. In *Sir Gawain* the magic is at first unambiguously exemplified in the Green Knight who cheerily survives decapitation, gleefully retrieving his head from being kicked around the floor and then holding it up to address the dais apparently totally unaffected by having that head no longer attached to his body (427-56). Later this magic becomes blended with religious miracle as Gawain sees a castle just after he has prayed in desperation for somewhere to shelter and hear Mass at Christmas (763-70). Each text thus imbues the natural world with a sense of the sacred and at the same time tacitly acknowledges that in order for a place to be sacred it must literally admit human presence. *Sir Gawain* and *The Secret Garden* reveal that the substitution identified by Glück rests on a longstanding mixture of wonder and appreciation (reverence) which typifies our human responses towards earth and its natural forces. Simultaneously, they recognise that running through such responses is a deep and paradoxical sense of being in close relation to, but separate from, the object revered.

In Glück's description of the consequences of substituting earth as an object of reverence for god, that paradoxical relation is described as consequence of the "hunger for meaning and disposition to awe" found in "the religious mind" which "transforms" "the anecdotes of natural process" into "myth" (Glück, 1994: 21). It is an appealing argument, particularly when our two texts contain characters who invite being read as personifications of such mythic transformations of natural processes. In the Green Knight and Dickon we are presented with figures who are clearly at one with the nonhuman world. The Green Knight's very

appearance invokes the Green Man of legend (Basford, 2002) with all his connotations of winter death and spring renewal, of Pagan rituals and seasonal cycles, while his alter ego, Bertilak, expresses in his hale and hearty love of hunting and outdoor pursuits a vibrant and confident version of the relationship between human and animal worlds (Marvin, 2006: 143-157). Dickon, in contrast, offers the more romantic notion of the boy whose empathy with animals is so strong he is never without a wild animal companion. He is explicitly linked to Pan, and while Burnett never exploits the wilder aspects of Pan in her book, Dickon retains in benign form elements of the untamed forces Pan represents. Both texts imply that these nature figures inhabit the wilder reaches of the outdoors world: in *Sir Gawain* that is initially whatever lies beyond the bounds of Camelot, later becoming specifically the wilderness of the North West in which the green chapel lies; in the *The Secret Garden* it is the equally untamed Yorkshire moors, which Mary sees but never ventures into, passing through them only when accompanied by Martha (Dickon's sister and Mary's maid) on a visit to the Sowerby's home. Yet, despite their apparently wild abodes, both Dickon and the Green Knight inhabit human homes. Dickon lives in a moorland cottage, one of the large Sowerby family, while the Green Knight, as Bertilak, lives in Hautdesert, a complete castle household of nobles and servants. Yet for each text it is this figure who seems to have the right understanding of the best relation of human to nonhuman worlds and so can be regarded as the embodiment of Glück's "instinct" of the twentieth century. That is, the Green Knight and Dickon do not dictate what is right or wrong so much as elicit responses from other characters which are indicative of the value systems at work in the societies they represent and the texts they inhabit. The Green Knight inspires fear and admiration, where Dickon elicits trust and affection, each reflecting the attitudes towards the natural world at the foundations of their respective texts. However, the critical moments of "myth-making" within these texts lie not in the deployment of these figures, but in the direct encounters with the environment that Gawain and Mary experience when they first discover the specific locations they set out to find.

The single most marked difference between the medieval poet's green chapel and Burnett's walled garden is that where the garden is a cultivated space now derelict and running wild, the "chapel" is nothing but wild landscape. The poem makes explicit the fact that it is only because Gawain has been assured that the chapel he seeks is here (albeit by a guide whose parting directions amount to "keep straight on and it's on your left; you can't miss it") that he is able to make a chapel out of the rocky landscape he is looking at. It is useful to trace the process of recognition here. First

Gawain halts, sitting on his horse and looking about him, “the chapel to seche: / He segh [saw] non suche in no side, and selly [strange] hym thoght” (2169-70). There is a slight ambiguity here as Gawain may be thinking the landscape itself “selly”, as well as finding it odd that there is no building. He then notices a rocky outcrop with a river bubbling through it, dismounts and explores on foot. There is a hole at one end and two further ones at either side, the top is overgrown with moss and grass: it is, the narrative surmises (now surely ventriloquising Gawain’s thoughts) “nobot an olde caue” (2182)—nothing but an old cave. It is only after much deliberation that he can contemplate even the possibility that this wild crevice can be the appointed “grene chapel” and even then he has to couch the possibility as a question because it looks more like a place the devil might say his morning prayers: “‘We, Lorde,’ quoth the gentyle knight, / ‘Whether this be the grene chapelle?’” (2185-6). A sharper contrast to Burnett’s garden it is hard to imagine; both are presented as wild, overgrown places, but one is the natural result of water on rock, while the other is a once carefully constructed and tended space run riot. Nevertheless finding the way in to each place requires a level of attention to the detail of the landscape that we rarely bestow on our surroundings.

Mary’s equivalent to Gawain’s slow scrutiny from the saddle and subsequent careful exploration on foot is her repeated study of the walls of the orchard which she knows must adjoin the locked garden. Chapter 5 sees her visiting one part of the Manor’s grounds more often than any other and even noticing that a section of the walk seems more neglected than the rest: “Mary stopped to notice this and wondered why it was so. She had just paused and was looking up at a long spray of ivy swinging in the wind when she saw a gleam of scarlet and heard a brilliant chirp” (28), which is of course the robin. It is a further two chapters before Mary discovers the key while watching the robin pecking for worms, hopping over and then stopping on “a small pile of freshly turned up earth” (40). Looking at this pile, Mary catches sight of the ring of the key, newly dug up (the narrative tells the reader but not Mary) by the dual forces of a mole and a dog (40). Impelled by this discovery Mary again searches for the door, but again draws a blank, despite getting nearer with her awareness that “the ivy was the baffling thing” (41). Here, as in *Sir Gawain*, the narrative reflects its protagonist’s thoughts and in doing so notes the increased attention the human is paying to the plants. No longer just “ivy” as in Chapter 5, the creeper now has “thickly-growing, glossy, dark green leaves” and it is when Mary is again by the wall with the untrained ivy that she sees a door knob briefly uncovered by a gust of wind. Although the focus on the natural surroundings is less explicit here than in *Sir Gawain* it

is nonetheless similar in that Mary finds the doorknob only because she is paying very particular attention to what is going on around her. As if to highlight the point, each text marks the moment of discovery/recognition with a pause in the narrative: Gawain identifies the chapel at the end of one stanza and then begins the next with speech on its desolation; Mary enters the garden at the end of Chapter 8 with the description of it following at the start of Chapter 9.

Mary's reaction is a complete contrast to Gawain's—he sees desolation and ugliness where she sees sweet neglect—but both feel that their respective places are cut off from the rest of the world and both promptly redefine the spaces they have found. For Mary this abandoned garden is now “a world all her own” (47) and her continued attention to it allows her to see the tips of emerging bulbs and smell the scent of oncoming spring. For Gawain what was previously “nobut an olde caue, / Or a creuisse of an olde cragge” (2182-3) speedily becomes a devilish place, fit for the fiend, “a chapel of meschaunce” (2195). Although this shift in definition may seem extreme (from natural to fiendish in one easy jump) it is less a change of perception than of terminology. Gawain's world view here accords with that summarized by Gregory Stone: “whatever is human is *not* natural and whatever is natural is *not* human” (Stone, 1998: 3), so all the nonhuman can be lumped together and regarded with suspicion. Regarding the crevasse as either natural or devilish means that whatever it may be, it is not an example of human architecture, which is what the word “chapel” normally connotes. He has overlooked the importance of the adjective “grene” that has tended to accompany “chapel” in this poem and in doing so has effectively relegated the natural world to mere backdrop. His recognition allows that backdrop to become central, but the moment passes quickly as, pat upon his realisation that this is indeed the “grene chapel” he has sought, comes the sound of the Green Knight sharpening his axe. A different apprehension takes over as Gawain in effect opts to deal with a figure who, as a knight, belongs to a familiar human social construct rather than continue the disconcerting encounter with a landscape that has called into question his understanding of the world.

Without recognising their surroundings for what they are neither Gawain nor Mary could have entered the place they set out to find, successful entry into which is a sign of worth in both *Sir Gawain* and *The Secret Garden*. Gawain has proved his ability to keep his word by finding the green chapel on the appointed day and goes on to make good his promise to abide a return blow from the giant Green Knight. In his text Gawain is the only unambiguously human character to gain this access;