The Literary Work as Stranger

The Disrupting Ethics of Defamiliarization and the Literariness of Literature

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A Search for Ethical Effects of Literary Aesthetics in a Post-Critical Landscape

Research Master Thesis

Literary Studies: Literature in the Modern Age

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Contents

Introduction: A Post-Critical Desire for Values 4

0.1: Setting the Scene: The Ethical Turn and The Return to Beauty 4

0.2: Objectives and Methodology 9

Chapter one: The Return of the Repressed 18

1.1: The Beautiful and the Literary: A Revival 18

1.2: Liberal Humanism 21

1.3: The Rise of Theory 23

1.4: The Lamentation of Values Lost, A Critique of Theory 27

1.5: 'Return' = 'Regression': Dangerous Territory 29

1.6: The Aesthetic Experience Revisited 33

1.7: Universalizing Tendencies in the Third Critique 35

Chapter two: On Empathy as Self-projection: *Saturday* as Nostalgic 'slice of mind' novel 40

2.1: Evil as 'Failure of the Imagination' 40

2.2: Literature as Empathically Inhabiting the Mind of the Other 40

2.3: Self-enclosed Perfection and Nostalgia for Ignorance in *Saturday* 44

2.4: Substituting the Other: *Saturday* and its Fantasies of Redemption 48

2.5: Conclusion: Empathy as Self-Projection and the Fantasy of Redemption 53

Chapter three: *What* Literature? From Realist Narrative Fiction to Literary Friction: Entangled Artfulness and Textfulness 56

3.1: Against Literature as a playground of Ethics 56

3.2: Art as Statement: the Primacy of Content over Style 62

3.3: Deconstructing the Form/Content Binary 66

3.4: Artfulness and Textfulness: Literary Style in Relation to Meaning 69

Chapter four: Defamiliarization and Literariness: Cutting Through Habitualized Perspectives 73

4.1: Defamiliarization in the History of Literary Criticism 73

4.2: Literariness and Foregrounding as Unchanging Essence 74

4.3: Against a 'Graveyard of Language': Shklovsky's "Art as a Technique" 77

4.4: Transformation of Conventional Perspectives and Reader Response 80

4.5: Unsettling the Self: Defamiliarization and Self-Understanding 86

Chapter five: Defamiliarization and the Other: *On Beauty* and the Ethics of Asymmetry 90

5.1: From Defamiliarization to Otherness 90

5.2: From the 'Literary' Other to Ethics 92

5.3: The Abyss between Ethics and Morality: Ineffability and Asymmetry 95

5.4: Strangers to Ourselves: Habitualization as Blindness to Singularity in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* 99

5.5 The Marks of Living disrupt Ideological Shells: Intimation of Howard's End 105

Conclusion: Regaining Experiential Awareness: Foreclosure of Closure 113

Works Cited 119

Introduction.: A Post-Critical Desire for Values

Experience of Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It's the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational.

–Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature", 1989.

0.1: Setting the Scene

After the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, it was merely a matter of days before a clamor for 'universal' values, or at least a reliable scale of evaluation, was to be discerned, emerging from all directions. Now more than ever, it seemed to be the vibe, the world needed something to fall back on, an essence or truth to believe in. It seems that a renewed desire for 'objectivity' has arisen in the aftermath of 9/11.

It is not particularly hard to imagine how at this time, new values are looked for to regain a sense of orientation in an ever more complex globalized world (Wolf 2008, 95). These are ethically and politically turbulent times, characterized by a sense of anxiety and ambiguity, a lack of security, the enforced awareness of millions of others, to the needs of whom we can no longer naively close our eyes since we are confronted with them in the multicultural streets of our domiciles and through 24h media coverage of global events. Cosmopolitanism and empathy make for a problematic combination; the constant awareness of innumerable faceless strangers and their fates sometimes seems an impossible attainment: moral ambivalence has taken over comfortable ignorance. The intrusive impact of mediated encounters with the lives of strangers remote from us in space and situation is characteristic for the ethical challenge of our age. Simon Cooke assesses this challenge in the following way:

> If we can characterize modernization and globalization as creating an increasing network of connections, as expanding the surface area of our interpersonal and intercultural contact zones, then the ethical imperative today is one in which we are required, not only to respond to a given situation as it occurs—to respond to an encounter in our immediate environment (with sympathy)—but to incorporate in our ethic a sense of what is happening elsewhere. (Cooke 2008, 166)

In a similar vein, in yet another essay in response to 9/11 ("Only Love and then Oblivion"), Ian McEwan expresses the need for loving compassion, imagination and empathy, "the core of our humanity" (McEwan 2001, 15[1]). The sense of discontent these critics convey is particularly directed at a political pragmatism that takes the form of a "dismissal of all attempts to measure public life by what are disparaged as mere ideals" (Sontag 2004a, 219), which in practice amounts to an abundance of cynical relativism.

Remarkably prominent in these 'aftershocks' is the correlation made between the attacks and the relativist strain of intellectual thought in the decades leading up to it: postmodernism or post-structuralism (rarely defined in these accounts), fierce dissolvers of universal values, unsurprisingly take the brunt of the accusations of relativism (Cf. Vaessens 2009, 69). As Kathleen Wall, who broadens the context of this development to include other atrocities besides 9/11, phrases it with a sense of drama:

> The postmodern attitude has died in a kind of fin de siècle despair at its inability to interrogate the consequences of its own provisionality and indecipherability; or in horror at deadly conflicts like those in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, or the Middle East; or in shock at the repeated sight of planes crashing into the twin towers and into our sense of security and complacency. (Wall 2008,757)

In the *Time Magazine* of 14-09-01, Roger Rosenblatt has called the intellectual climate caused by postmodernism the "Age of Irony"—characterized by an insistence that "[n]othing was real" (Rosenblatt 2001, 1). Rosenblatt suspects that the planes flying into the World Trade Center have efficiently brought an end to this, effecting a new awareness of the reality of the evil of "a group of savage zealots," of the good of those coming to help others, and "the greatness of the country" (*Ibid*.3-4).

On a similar note, Edward Rothstein has conveyed his hope that the attacks would challenge the intellectual and ethical views of both postmodernism and postcolonialism,[2] which will come to be seen as "ethically perverse," in particular the challenge they pose to the objective validity of truth and ethical judgment, their premise that "seemingly universalist principles of the West are ideological constructs," and that "one culture, particularly the West, cannot reliably condemn another, that a form of relativism must rule" (Rothstein 2001, 17, 2).

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[1] For sources accessed online, like this essay, I will include in my citations the number of the paragraph referred to when page numbers are not given.

[2] Both authors refrain from any substantial definition of these intellectual schools, invoking—together with publication dates only a few days after the attacks—the assumption that the utterances in articles like these are of an impulsive and emotional, more than reflective and critical, character, ignoring, as they do, the 'ethical turns' made in both fields no later than the 1980s.

Under these ruling paradigms, as Rothstein has it, an unproblematic condemnation of the attacks is rendered impossible, since the cause of the attack would be traced back to Western imperialism, making the only response feasible a "guilty passivity in the face of ruthless and unyielding opposition" (*Ibid*.17).

From a postmodernist perspective we can no longer make an appeal to fundamental truths that pre-exist any discussion; there is no essential core of logos around which our thinking is structured. Universal truths are merely ideological constructions relative to their context: truth is relativized, impeding any universal legitimation of power structures (Vaessens 2009, 42). The 'excesses' of what once started out as a project of critical questioning, its opponents now characterize as a nihilistic 'anything goes' (*Ibid*.76; Buikema 2010, 5). In the relativist approach to art and literature, evaluative standards have dissolved since the Grand Narratives of history have been destabilized and dismantled, foreclosing the possibility of absolute judgments (*Ibid*.5). Susan Sontag puts her finger on the spot: "The greatest offence (in art, culture and politics) is to seem to be upholding a better, more exigent standard. (both left *and* right call this naïve or elitist)" (Sontag 2004a, 219). Among the lost values lamented, this implies, are aesthetic ones: as is well-known, the relativist disposition holds that aesthetic value is a construction rather than an intrinsic property of a literary text or work of art.

Though voiced forcefully in the aftermath of 9/11, these critiques by no means originated here: in Humanities departments, a sense of dissatisfaction with the lack of theoretical valuation has lingered since the 1980s. In the absence of any standard of truth, as George Steiner bluntly expresses it, in the humanities "[a]nyone can say anything" (Steiner 2002, 153). On the subject of literature and aesthetics, in particular, the loss of validity of discourse on literariness and beauty, once deemed to improve us morally, has been deeply regretted by some.

In Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty* (2005), the deconstructionist tendency to interrogate art for ideological subtext is parodied extensively, for instance when a student talks about the deconstructive rigor professed in her art classes, a simile in which the tomato represents art or aesthetics:

> The tomato is just totally revealed as this phoney construction that can't lead you to some higher truth – nobody's pretending the tomato will save your life. Or make you happy. Or teach you how to live or *ennoble* you or be *a great example of the human spirit*. Your tomatoes have got nothing to do with *love* or *truth*. They're not fallacies.

> They're just these pretty pointless tomatoes that people, for totally selfish reasons of their own, have attached cultural – I should say *nutritional* - weight to. (*OB* 312)

Needless to say, the traditional values attributed to literature in the heyday of its scholarly inquiry have long been discarded. Whereas once we believed that reading beautiful texts could make us more virtuous beings, now "Renaissance humanism, as translated by Enlightenment and Romantic values, will no longer sustain us. To that extent, we are indeed in a posthumanist culture" (Scholes 2005, 728).

For the subject of literature, these utterances combined pose the question, lurking in the recesses of academies for a while, to the literariness of literature and its ethical effects. Is there something to distinguish this artistic medium from the abundance of discourses enveloping us in these media-saturated times? Since advanced critical approaches treat literature as one discourse among others (Cf. Bernheimer 1993), it has lost its "aura" and "mystique" (Vaessens 2009, 38) and its associations of moral improvement. Suddenly it had to compete with a whole array of other, more exciting and interactive media. To privilege literature would be an elitist fallacy, which seems to go for ethics as well as aesthetics: "the concern for ethics and value may be met with skepticism these days because any attempt to find definite answers will ultimately be suspected of promoting either tyrannically universalist or embarrassingly naive values" (Neumann 2008, 131). As to where exactly the blame lies for this loss, opinions vary: Thomas Vaessens condemns postmodernism and deconstruction, 'cultural studies' is the scapegoat for Marjorie Perloff and Richard Rorty, whereas 'theory' has cast its shadows over literature in the account of Jonathan Culler.[3]

As part of the renewed interest in values and evaluation, now beauty, according to Wall, is the "phoenix .. arisen from the ashes of the postmodern world view" (Wall 2008, 757). Apparently it has brought its brothers and sisters along, comprising a group of interrelated phoenixes including art, aesthetics, literature and ethics: all that once was allegedly repressed by rigid intellectuals. I am particularly interested here, in two very divergent manifestations of these counter-reactions to poststructuralist theory: the 'ethical

[3] Culler does not adopt an antagonistic stance to theory, and therefore he is the odd man out in this vicinity: He only observes that theoretical texts of the poststructuralist sort have come to already embody the specific workings of literariness in themselves: "the literary has migrated into theory" (Culler 2007, 39); he does not evaluate this as a negative development per se, he only poses the need for a corrective in an attention to the form and style of literary works, which, as he sees it, is already happening. Like I strive to do here, Culler reflects the prevailing discontent descriptively:"One of the complaints against theory … has been that it takes students away from literature and literary values" (*Ibid*.4).

criticism' that emerged in the late 1980s as part of the 'Ethical Turn,' enveloping various scholarly endeavors on the borders of literature and moral philosophy; and the 'Return to Beauty' in art history, literary studies and the Humanities at large, in the early 1990s.

ETHICAL CRITICISM

In the words of Herbert Grabes, ethical criticism presented itself as a "return of an ethical discourse at the very moment when postmodern anti-foundationalist thought as well as the theoretical dissolution of the subject seemed to be having disastrous consequences for any attempts to justify any kind of ethics" (Grabes 2008, 1). Due to the poststructuralist understanding of culture as construct, the replacement of the Cartesian subject by conflicting desires that are themselves subjugated to power structures, any foundational standard for prescriptive ethical obligations is rendered superfluous.[4]

Surprisingly for a tradition that emerged in an antagonistic relation to these intellectual strands, philosophers who returned to ethical thought in the 1980s, most prominently Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth, did not engage in a dialogue with postmodern postulations dismantling ethical theories (*Ibid*.1). Instead, they chose to circumvent the issue by abandoning moral theory in the prescriptive sense of the legitimization of rules and obligations, returning to the premodern, Aristotelian question of 'how to lead a good life?,' an "ethics of moral guidance" (*Ibid*.3).

Ethical critics employ literary narrative as a field of demonstration and testing ground for responsible and rewarding human conduct. Literary novels (mostly in the 19th century realist tradition) are used as a means of ethical guidance. The ethical benefit that literature can bring us, according to them, resides in the experience of *empathy*, of living vicariously through the (textual) other while retaining a distance, enabling the reader to reflect on complex situations. This is thought to expand our capacities of ethical judgment in real life, for it allows us to obtain an understanding of the uniqueness of every situation.

[4] These utterances were very shortly followed by an ethical turn in the poststructuralist tradition, combining ethics with a deconstructionist mode of reading. J. Hillis Miller, in 1987, wrote an Ethics of Reading in order to show that, albeit far from promoting traditional morality, deconstruction by no means precluded ethical attitudes, albeit performing them with a twist. Part of this ethical turn in post-structuralism was a revival of the philosophy of Immanuel Levinas. This is the ethical tradition to which I adhere in this thesis, as explicated in chapter 5.

THE RETURN TO BEAUTY

The other development that I wish to address here, is the 'Return to Beauty'. Critics who associate themselves with this term locate its origins in a transformation in art as practice as well as theories of art and culture in the early 1990s. More specifically, this change is usually dated from the publication of Dave Hickey's book *The Invisible Dragon* (1993) *and* the audience's negative reactions to the decidedly politicized Whitney Biennial exhibition that same year (Cf. Wolff 2006). Hickey set the tone in his book by stating: "The issue of the nineties will be *beauty*!" (Hickey 2009, 11).

While the focus lies on the aesthetics of art instead of empathic engagement with narrative literature, in this movement, the shift from the (aesthetic) experience is to morality is made by some as well: in the idea, for instance, that the communal dialogue about what we value could forge tighter societal bonds (Cf. Donoghue 2003). In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry has passionately pleaded her case for the power of beauty to go against egotism and continuously inspire in us the creativity needed to arrive at justice. She argues that beautiful objects form *the* point of departure for both self and communal betterment because they generate an impetus to a better, more just ethical order. This is due to the symmetry of formal beauty, which is transposed to a symmetry or equality in social relations. The return to beauty, as I will elucidate in the first chapter of this thesis, employs a conception of the aesthetic (key words: symmetry, form, purity) that seems very much derived from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

0.2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

In revisiting ideas on art and literature that have to some extent been discarded by theory, and in the absence of a dialogue with these theories they seek to withstand, the question imposes itself, to what extent these ideas re-valuing art and literature for aesthetic and ethical benefits are evasive and a-historical, refuse to engage in a critical questioning of their underlying assumptions. To what extent, I deem it important to ask, do suchlike return to questions once discarded indeed embody a *return* to the intellectual climate of the eighteenth (Kant) and nineteenth (social realism) century? I am especially concerned with the extent of their acknowledgement of, and accountability for, *differences* between readers and perceiving subjects of literature and art, and a veiled endeavor to represent aesthetics and ethics as a form

of *consolation* in the face of anxiety and turbulence as sketched above. To what extent do these returns contain a regression, a nostalgic retreat to a more innocent, liberal humanist age?

This concerns me because I hold that when literature and aesthetics are strategically employed to serve goals of consolation and redemption—as, for instance tellingly revealed in Richard Rorty's essay "Redemption from Egotism" (2001)—this gives the ethically troubled reader what she wants, providing all-too-simple answers to complex ethical situations, playing into the subject's thirst for values and beliefs. Thus the enterprise is at risk of being misused for the universalizing of prevalent moral and political views, examples of which I see in Rosenblatt's "greatness" of the American nation and Fred Halliday's call for *Western* reason and universal values to take the lead in emancipating the world as a cure for fundamentalist hatred (shortly addressed in the second chapter of this thesis). What these apparently divergent approaches have in common, I will argue, is *reduction*: of otherness and difference to sameness and symmetry, of singularity to generality, of the literary to a content or message directly transferable to reality.

The relevance of this point of departure lies in the combination of these questions of 'evaluation'—of the aesthetic, the literary, the ethical—in a critical landscape still characterized by post-structuralism. Those who uncritically embrace literature as humanizer neglect the singularity of readers; those who ascribe to literary texts ethical beneficial effects for society, usually have not focused on aesthetics and literariness; those who, in the line of the 'Return to Beauty' argument, do focus on aesthetic characteristics, tend to forget that art and literature necessarily originate in a certain culture, hence are made up of its contextual materials. *All* these elements have to be accounted for in order to grasp the complex interrelations between the aesthetics of literature and its alleged ethical effects on readers, which is the topic of this thesis.

The first chapter offers a more extensive overview of the discussions at hand, where I provide some historical background on liberal humanism and the rise of theory. I will sketch a preliminary argument against uncritical exclamations to the effect of art and literature's ethical effects, mostly focusing on the 'return to beauty'. The movement towards symmetry in these accounts, a nostalgic disregard for difference, and their employment of aesthetics as a form of consolation are traced back to the influence of Immanuel Kant.

The second chapter will address the notion of the literary reading experience as characterized by *empathy* as a moralizing force, as expressed by scholars associated with

ethical criticism. I will critically assess this understanding of literary ethics through a thematic reading of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005) in the framework of (1) the 'nostalgic' tendencies laid bare in the first chapter of this thesis, of making aesthetics and ethics into a gesture towards symmetry to console us in the face of ethical ambiguity, and (2) the notion of empathy, which will be looked at both as a theme in the novel, and as informing the novel as a whole. On this basis I will offer a critique of empathy as a 'tool' for ethical improvement through literature, which will be exposed as a reduction of otherness to self-sameness comparable to that inherent in the 'return to beauty' arguments. Again, I argue, this tendency puts literature in the service of consoling fantasies.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, almost unanimously lauded in its reception (Head 2007, 178)[5], reflects on the transforming powers of aesthetics during one day in the life of the middle-aged neurosurgeon Henry Perowne. In an ongoing stream-of-consciousness narrative[6] entirely in the present tense, more precisely described by Dominic Head as a "diagnostic 'slice of mind' novel—working towards the literary equivalent of a CT scan—rather than a modernist 'slice of life' novel" (*Ibid.*192), we are witness to this character's every thought displayed in free indirect discourse.

A thoroughly decent man and hard-working liberal who leads an enviable, almost perfect life with his loving, successful, talented family members—his wife Rosalind the lawyer, his daughter Daisy the acclaimed poetess, his son Theo the blues musician—Perowne has created a harmonious little community of order and beauty, comfort and luxury. He is, however, painfully aware of the fact that modern luxuries and comforts are precarious goods, and precious, harmonious communities are fragile. Plagued as he is by an anxious tendency to close a tight circle around himself, his riches and his family, his big, heavily buttressed house serves as a metaphor of the anticipation of the external perturbation of harmony omnipresent

[5] Theo Tait, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, on the occasion of his review of the novel, calls McEwan "the most admired English writer of his generation" (Tait 2005, 22); Ruth Scurr of *The Times* adds that he "may now be the best novelist of his generation—and is certainly operating at the height of his powers" (Scurr 2005, 13); in the *Sunday Times*, Peter Kemp concludes that *Saturday* "reinforces [McEwan's] status as the supreme novelist of his generation" (Kemp 2005, 42).

[6] In this, and its duration of one single day, *Saturday* has as its literary predecessors James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. To the latter it has been compared more than once in reviews: besides the structural and stylistic similarities of the stream-of-conscious narratives where memories are embedded in the present narration, parallels in the plots of these novels include the observation of a spectacle in the sky, the preparations for a party in the evening, and obstructions across town. Finally, there is the juxtaposition between the mentally sound and the mentally deranged (the latter category represented by Baxter in *Saturday* and by the shell-shocked Vietnam veteran Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway), with the important difference that in Woolf's novel, focalization is shared between multiple protagonists, whereas in *Saturday*, we are only acquainted with Perowne's perspective.

in this novel. *Saturday* explores to what point we can buttress ourselves against disharmony creeping in from the world outside—outside our minds, our houses, our families.

Henry's fearful anticipation of things falling apart is linked to the idea of mortality, evoked by the knowledge that one day, all these precious things we gather around us and try to protect, will outlast us and be scattered, to finally dissolve: "how easily an existence, its ambitions, networks of family and friends, all its cherished stuff, solidly possessed, could so entirely vanish" (*Sat* 6). His least favorite realization, though, is that the human mind can be likewise scattered, a fate that has befallen his mother: suffering from dementia and nominal aphasia, she is lost in time, her identity unraveled thread by thread. This fragility of the brain is Perowne's severest apprehension, because all faith he has, he has put in that organ he knows so well. Significantly, the threat looming over him during this day will present itself in the form of the scattered mind of the outsider Baxter, in an instance of *peripeteia* representing the inability to guard ourselves from intrusions and the irrationality of chance. *Saturday* provides us with a powerful representation of the interrelations between aesthetic experiences (especially of literature) and empathic engagement with otherness, and these are set against the background of the moral and political anxiety sketched out above. Therefore I deem this novel very apt to the endeavor of elucidating the specific interests at stake in arguing for a re-valuation of beauty and ethics.

My objective in the current study is twofold: this thesis is informed negatively, on the one hand, by identifying in these strands of criticism a nostalgic urge to totality and symmetrical sameness characteristic of liberal humanism, which as I will argue, serves to console the reader in times of anxiety, having ethical corollaries of retreat from ambiguity. On the other hand, I want to come to a positive rethinking of the ethical effects of literary aesthetics in a post-critical intellectual environment,[7] without ignoring what has been thought and written about these subjects before, at all times precautious for retrograde humanistic axioms to be smuggled in again through the back door. In arguing for the effects of the

[7] Of course there can be no talk of morality in a systematizable or prescriptive sense when it comes to literary reading: 'moral' and 'ethical' have different resonances, which have to be taken into account: the former, derived from a Latin word for social custom, refers to codes of rules and systems of value and conduct, both in the descriptive and in the normative sense; the latter, derived from a Greek word for personal character, is more open, not necessarily shared by groups, and envelops all kinds of values (Cf. Gert 2008). In anticipation of my argument about literary ethics in chapter 5, I want to side with Andrew Gibson who defines the latter as a "kind of play within morality, [that] holds it open, hopes to restrain it from violence or the will to domination, subjects it to a kind of auto-deconstruction" (*Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*, 15; cited in Grabes 2008, 2).

experience of reading literature, we cannot afford to fall back into "jolly good humanism" (Huyssen 1986, 20).

Moving from a more general discussion of the ethical effects of art, to the topic of literature, in the third chapter I take issue with the *concept of the literary* that emanates from theories of ethical criticism. I will show the category of 'literature' implied here to be interchangeable with realist narrative fiction, and in that respect both too exclusive, and not exclusive enough. To account for the specificity of literature as an art form, I argue for an attention to literary style, and theorize the interrelatedness of style, content and meaning in literature.

The fourth chapter of this thesis proposes a model for the reading experience that is specific for literature and related to the ethical, through an investigation of the interrelated concepts of foregrounding, literariness and, most importantly, defamiliarization. Defamiliarization, it will be argued, is an experience of the formal process of perceiving, thinking and feeling, which can be described as a momentary move away from the world, followed by a return to it with an enriched perceptual outlook. This asks for an attitude of openness, a willingness to engage with the transforming potential of the text; herein lie the ethical implications of defamiliarization for our ways of attending to otherness.

The question left to answer at that point, is how this demand for openness links to an ethical attitude towards human others, or, how do we extend a disruptive reading experience to the numerous demands posed by the encounters with others in our daily lives, in a particular society? How do we move from a one-on-one relating between a specific reader and a specific text to the realm of interpersonal and social conduct (if such a move is possible at all)? To come to an answer, I place the defamiliarizing effects of literary reading in a Levinasian-cum-Derridean framework, in which ethics is characterized by a fundamental *asymmetry*. Could defamiliarization lead to a more just society or equal social relations? In other words, what are the limits of this process and its transformative effects? I conclude this chapter with a reading of Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty* (2005), in the frame of the relation between defamiliarization and ethics outlined here.

In contrast to *Saturday*, an exploration of the mind of one man, *On Beauty* bequeaths us with a kaleidoscope of focalization through an abundance of characters (phrased by an extra-heterodiegetic narrator), of which Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps are just the tip of the iceberg. The book revolves around the families of these academic archrivals, propagators

of conflicting ideas about beauty, art, ideology and Rembrandt. British radical theorist Howard teaches art history at (fictional) Massachusetts university Wellington, where, to his desperation, his nemesis and advocate of cultural conservatism obtains a position as well. Whereas Howard—hardcore atheist—sees beauty as an ideological construct, in Monty's view it is a "gift from God", and poetry "the first mark of the truly civilized" (*OB* 44; 94). The two can be best described as satirical archetypes of the two extremes of scholarly views on aesthetics as outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, as caricaturized by their opponents.[8] The paintings Howard lectures on, he has "seen … so many times he [can] no longer see [them] at all" (*OB* 144).

However radically opposed these stances seem, both, in their dogmatism, amount to a blindness towards the singularity of otherness, resulting in egotistic behavior towards their students and families due to inattention to their unique particularities. Both men objectify and generalize, seize and instrumentalize everything on their paths as additions to their strongly founded identities. In Howard's case, this blindness as corollary to his "hard ideological shell" (*OB* 355) causes him to prefer the abstract objectified images of a colleague and a student of his, over the singular, concrete uniqueness of his own wife, threatening to destroy his marriage and disintegrate his family. In contrast to the Perowne family's case, the less-than-perfect Belsey's are threatened by forces from within the gates. *On Beauty* presents an imaginative literary observation on how 'defamiliarizing' experiences affect a diverse range of characters in their daily lives, privately and professionally, influencing their modes of being in the world and engaging in inter-human relations.

In attempting to reassess the ethical effects of the literariness of literature I will do what many before me have done. The challenge, as it appears to me, is the search for a way of discussing these matters while retaining critical awareness, disavowing a regression into discredited assumptions of the timeless beauty of sunsets and the song of birds tied to abstract universal values. It is my conviction that if literature touches upon the ethical, the point of interface lies in the aesthetic experience. This thesis proposes a conception of literariness and ethics that centers around this experience, catalyzed by literary style: it is the artfulness of the

[8] Monty is despised by Howard as a "man who had dedicated his life to the perverse politics of right-wing iconoclasm," (*OB* 29) whose work is "retrogressive", "perverse" and "infuriatingly essentialist" (*OB* 12). At the other extreme, Howard is the perfect embodiment of 'dry, sardonic knowingness,' clothing 'resentment in jargon' as viewed by the defenders of beauty in the line of Rorty and Perloff, living in "denial of *joy*" (*OB* 236). His academic career is based on the notion that beauty asks for deconstruction and is itself irrelevant at best, oppressive at its worst.

language employed in literary texts that allows for effects that touch upon the ethical to come into existence.

Can we argue for literariness in the twenty-first century, when other forms of media have become so prevalent? Or, as Rosemarie Buikema poses the question more positively: "[h]ow is it possible … that in this kind of world a written text can seize you, perturb you, become part of your consciousness?" (Buikema 2009, 10). And is it feasible to answer this question without falling prey to nostalgia and a *faux* naiveté, to answer it, in other words, in a critical dialogue with theory? Is there a model conceivable for the aesthetic experience of literary texts, that avoids these pitfalls? To what extent is this relation specific for literary reading, does it occur elsewhere? In other words, can we still speak of literariness after theory, or better, in the post-critical age?[9]

What literariness can certainly *not* entail now, is some intrinsic, essential core property shared by all literary texts, as the Formalists and Prague Circle Linguists proposed (Cf. Chapter 4 of this thesis); but neither can it be a message relevant to 'humanity in general,' a set of answers to the Great questions of life using style as an embellishment to lure us into engagement. Literature as experience, I will show, can be unique and ungeneralizable without ever tipping over into objective values and universal truths.

METHODOLOGY In order to explicate this I turn to the assessment of a diverse body of literary criticism, but the most important influences for this paper are Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization as set out in "Art as a Technique" (1921) and the notion of otherness as theorized by Derek Attridge, who draws on the work of Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Levinas.[10] I deem the ethics of the Levinasian/Derridian type well applicable to the current global situation, due its focus on notions of guilt and ambiguity—by their stress on the impossibility of reducing the other to self-sameness, I will argue, the ethics set out here refuses to be consoling, it rather disrupts the subject out of a self-centered lack of awareness.

[9] With 'after theory' I mean very generally after the moment in academic history when critical theory became omnipresent, as opposed to the more intuitive, 'naïve' approach of liberal humanism, as will sketched in chapter one, where 'theory' will also be defined. I will not go into the possibility of 'post-theory,' and I will refrain from statements on postmodernism being 'over'. I am specifically concerned here with theoretical efforts that refer back to ideas on literature and art from *before* theory, which in my view disguise premises long discarded and of an insufficiently theoretical base. These can be seen as a consequence of poststructuralist theory. Therefore it is better to speak, with Janet Wolff, of 'post-critical'. "Post-critical aesthetics" is defined by Wolff as "aesthetic debate in the aftermath of the critiques of postmodernism, feminism, and post-colonial theory" (Wolff 2006, 144).

[10] Ironically Derrida's name now occurs so often as metonym for the cynical disregard for literature, drawing sardonic pleasure in "deconstructing everything away" (freely rendered from Vaessens 2009)—one has only to be pointed to the citation adorning the top end of this introduction, to correct this image.

In this respect it is very much congruent to the effects of defamiliarization on the reader, as will become clear. Referring to the marriage I forge between defamiliarization, the 'making strange' of the literary text, and an ethics in which the *opacity* and impenetrability, rather than a lucid understanding, of the other and the self are central, I call the experience of *literature as literature* an approach to the text as stranger, following Attridge: "[r]ather than the familiar model of the literary work as friend and companion, sharing with the reader its secrets, I propose the work as stranger, even and perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately" (Attridge 1999, 26).

I am aware that I have contrasted matters somewhat sharply, in this introduction as in the first chapter, in order to map the polemics at hand. Jean-François Lyotard, in "Rewriting Modernity" (1986), has raised caution for taking up a perspective on chronological successions, as I do here: periodization, the division of history into distinct moments, only causes the 'now' to slip through our fingers. This adds a sense of artificiality to a thesis which I start with attempting to get a grip on a 'state of the art' in a transitory 'now,' demarcating what is not truly separated: "If it is true that historical knowledge demands that its object be isolated and withdrawn from any libidinal investment come from the historian, it is certain that the only way of 'putting down' [*rédiger*] history would be to 'put it down' [*réduire*]" (Lyotard 1986, 29). As an alternative to a relentless probing back which only leads, as we shall see, to a resurfacing of the 'repressed'—whether it is aesthetics or its condemnation—in different guises,[11] Lyotard poses Freud's *Durcharbeitung*, an act of thinking devoted to that which, in a past event and its meaning, stays hidden from us. Unlike remembering, 'working through' never stops, it is not driven by an end. It could lead to a more fruitful, less reductionist way of dealing with history. Whilst inspired by a more associative practice of psychoanalysis, and thus not entirely applicable to scholarly analyses, I deem it a rewarding concept to have in mind for what follows.

In order to come to a rethinking of literariness and its ethical corollaries in a way that is not haunted by the repressed specter of long-discarded liberal humanist assumptions, we need to 'think through' a notion of the aesthetic that does not revisit the nineteenth-century ideal of a cultivating, civilizing and humanizing force guiding us to proper readings and the

[11] When encountering the oppositions in the ideology- aesthetics debate, one cannot help but noticing the resemblances to the battle between Marxist and Formalist literary critique in the 1920s.

right judgments of taste and supporting decent conduct, but that nevertheless opens up spaces for theorizing a relation between aesthetics and ethics.

I derive parts of the answer to my research question from very heterogeneous material, hoping in combining them, to exceed the sum of their parts, to come to a new perspective: in that respect, the argument is construed not totally unlike a literary text is, in a famous description by Roland Barthes, “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages” (Barthes 1986, 160). By analogy, I hope I do not infinitely install the signified (*Ibid*.158).

Chapter 1: The Return of the Repressed

What novels give us is not new information but a new capacity for compassion with beings different from ourselves; in this sense, novels are more part of the moral sphere than of science. The ultimate horizon of that experience is not truth but love.

—Tzvetan Todorov, "What is Literature For?", 2007.

One can play and sing Schubert in the evening, and torture in the morning.

—George Steiner, "The Muses' Farewell," 2002.

This chapter outlines some fairly recent developments in the humanities at large and literary studies in particular, beginning with the much-heard call for an increasing attention to the aesthetics of art and cultural productions and the literariness of literature, often linked to an emphasis on alleged ethical benefits. To gain insight in the matters at stake here, a short historical overview of different approaches to these topics is given, from liberal humanism to poststructuralist theory. This is followed by a rendition of a recent polemics between advocates and opponents of aesthetics in literary studies in particular and the humanities at large, after which I point out the risks entailed in any uncritically celebratory account of the moral virtues aesthetics can convey. The tendency in these accounts towards symmetry, a nostalgic disregard for difference, and their employment of aesthetics as a form of consolation is traced back to the influence of Immanuel Kant. The chapter ends with a note on the importance of rethinking aesthetics and its ethical corollaries in a way that does not entail a relapse into long-discarded liberal humanist assumptions.

1.1 The Beautiful and the Literary: a Revival

Since the last two decennia, a resurgence can be discerned of humanities scholarship on beauty and aesthetics. After almost a century of near silence, these subjects are foregrounded once again as deserving of insistent intellectual inquiry.[12] Once again, critics have taken an

[12] Besides those texts discussed in this section, just the tip of the ice-berg: Peg Zeglin Brand, (Ed.) *Beauty Matters*, Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 2000; Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago, Open Court Publishing.Company 2003; Umberto Eco (Ed.), *History of Beauty*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2004. Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and democracy*. Los Angeles: Art issues Press, 1997; James Kirwan, *Beauty*. Manchester U.P., 1999; Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of*

interest in what might be broadly delineated as aesthetic experience: an interest that is unequivocally denoted as a 'comeback,' the revisiting of something once lost or repressed, brusquely expelled from the academic stage many moons ago, finally coming back with a vengeance.

But the experience has not clawed its way back into the universities unaccompanied: it has dragged some other long forgotten values with it. I am referring to a common tendency of these advocates of beauty to bestow it with an exceptional aptness to ethical enhancement. In this line of thought, the experience of art derives its uniqueness from its promotion of justice, equality or mutuality, rendering it valuable for social or political goals. Discourse on beauty's return is integrally tied up with ethical concerns, a commitment to its interpersonal impact. As it seems, critics and public of art and literature are not only occasioned to be moved again by the age-old sensation of the aesthetic: in the same movement, they are called upon to restore disturbed communal bonds through a renewed attention to beauty.

In *Speaking of Beauty* (2003), Denis Donoghue argues for a return of the beautiful as an authentic category of value and ethical importance in society. According to Donoghue, the formal dimension of the work of art grants it aesthetic as well as ethical unity: it allows the work to uphold the force it effects as a complex harmony against the "pressure of official consideration" (Donoghue 2003, 115). By transfiguring what already exists, formal elements grant the work freedom (*Ibid*.121). It is this freedom that gives art its special capacity of creating justice. By calling to mind the Kantian paradox of taste (while the experience of beauty is highly subjective, it nevertheless makes a claim to universality: we implicitly assume that others agree with our judgments[13]), he underscores the vitality of maintaining the communal discussion about what is beautiful, what we value; a dialogue which could forge tighter bonds between people in a community.

In subscribing to the connection between beauty and justice, Donoghue does not stand alone, as the title of Elaine Scarry's book *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) indicates. Scarry, too, stresses the ethical significance of beauty, emanating from its particularity (Scarry 1999,

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Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2007; Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th-Century Art*. New York: Free Press. 2001.

[13] In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) Kant sketches this antinomy: while our judgments of beauty are highly subjective, they involve a claim to universality at the same time, an intuition that all humans should agree: that is, we assume a *sensus communis* underlying aesthetic judgments. However, since there are no rules according to which beauty can be judged, or at least none that we conclusively agree upon, we can never know if our judgment is right. All we can do is confront our views collectively, submit them to interpersonal discussion. (Cf. Kant 1964, 241-65)

18). She characterizes beauty as training our attention to the particular: an attention which is then extended to the ethical particularities of the world we live in. When we notice a beautiful object, the argument goes, it momentarily becomes the center of our universe. In this movement, the self is pulled away from being the axis of its own ethical specter. Now the beautiful object fills the empty spot left, a new selfhood is created, with at its heart the care of the beautiful thing (*Ibid*.110-12). This reassignment of ethical priorities delights the subject since it has been brought about through a unison of aesthetic 'fairness'—the experience of beauty in symmetry, and ethical 'fairness'—the idea of a symmetry of social relations (*Ibid*.96). Thus, Scarry proclaims, beauty seduces one to privilege the other above the self when it comes to ethical considerations. Beauty continuously inspires in us the creativity needed to arrive at justice. This inspiration generates an ethics of distribution, since it stimulates us to create more beautiful things and form just arrangements between people.

In a similar vein, Peter de Bolla, in his book *Art Matters* (2001), chooses to describe the work of art as a 'presence' that teaches us how we should approach it, since "the act of looking at a painting requires some form of reconciliation or accommodation between the presence of the viewer—the sense one has of being here in the act of looking—and that announced by the painting itself" (De Bolla 2001, 24). When we devote ourselves to the formal properties of the work, an inter-subjectivity between self and work arises, teaching us "*how* the work interacts with [our] affective response[s]" (*Ibid*.27). Thus, he argues, art brings across a special form of knowledge of which the work harbors a surplus, but that is not for us to 'know' in the usual sense. This impossibility of knowing is exactly what the work brings across, and this stimulates an attitude towards it as were it a living being, with which we can attain a certain level of intimacy and mutual 'accommodation' (*Ibid*.24–5). This inter-subjective relation between work and beholder, de Bolla calls an "act of witnessing" (*Ibid*.49). Similar to Scarry's road to justice and Donoghue's communal dialogue, de Bolla sees in art a power to stir us to "share experiences, worlds, beliefs, and differences" (*Ibid*.15).

In scholarly texts more exclusively centered on the literary object, this call for a 'return' of the aesthetic has manifested itself repeatedly as the return of 'the literary,' as articulated by critics like Richard Rorty, Marjorie Perloff and Tzvetan Todorov. In his own book on 'the literary' in literary studies—*The Literary in Theory* from 2007—Jonathan Culler announces that there are indications of the literary gaining momentum, "both in a return to questions of aesthetics … and in the use of literary works to advance and to question

theoretical assumptions" (Culler 2007, 14). But no more than beauty has the literary come back on its own account: it, too, is often deemed to have an ethical corollary. In an argument echoing Scarry, Rorty attributes to literary reading the power to cure us of our egotism, our illusion of self-sufficiency (Rorty 2001, 234-63). Generally, reading literature is linked to the attainment of a more profound understanding of the *condition humaine*, teaching us important truths about "the individual and society, about love and hate, and about joy and despair" (Todorov 2007, 18). Implicitly or explicitly, this brings across a notion of literature making us more humane or helping us "fulfill our human potential" (*Ibid*.17).

Before dwelling on these intriguing promises, it is important to ask ourselves why the return of the aesthetic or the literary is propagated this forcefully at this specific moment in time: where was it all this time, what scared it away, and why should we want it back now? To get a firm grasp on these issues, we need to go far, far back in the history of literary study.

1.2 Liberal Humanism

In his Presidential Address of the MLA in 2004, "The Humanities in a Post-humanist World," Robert Scholes has reminded us that once upon a time, the literary text was the nucleus of what would later be known as the 'humanities' (stemming from 'humanism,' a world view organized around the concept of man). Literature as we know it was derived from the Enlightenment notion of 'belles lettres,' which in turn comes from the Renaissance concept of *literae humaniores*: literature (poetry and rhetoric) was deemed 'more humane' than other forms of study, and intensive exploration of it could steer us toward better lives. As George Steiner retrospectively summarizes, "[c]entral to the human civilization from the Renaissance onward, has been the credo that the spread of education, the cultivation of sense and sensibility through literature and the arts, the dissemination of exemplary values manifest in the classics, would gradually attenuate, indeed efface the atavistic ferocities of the 'human animal'" (Steiner 2002, 150). During the Romantic period, when taste was bluntly equaled to virtue, esteem for imaginative texts reached unprecedented heights (Scholes 2005, 728-29). Beauty and ethical merit were inseparable: Matthew Arnold, high priest of the cult of Culture, elevated literature to the "study of [harmonious] perfection" (*Ibid*.829).

When humanism filled the void of religion as Western ideology-provider number one, our conception of art was reconfigured, henceforth revolving around beautiful objects instead of icons of divinity. From the late eighteenth century on, when Kant's aesthetic theory saw the

light of day, 'literature' designated a set of beautiful texts. Like the opaque truths of religion, those mediated by the literary symbol are opportunely closed off to rational demonstration, and can therefore manifest themselves as absolute, as Terry Eagleton explains this development (Eagleton 2001, 2243-244). And, like religion, literature works first and foremost through feeling and experience. In a quest for 'humanization,' literary reading, a private, contemplative activity, presented a powerful antidote to political intolerance and ideological extremism (*Ibid*.2246). According to Eagleton, literature is the medium *par excellence* to vividly dramatize moral values, therefore it could become 'moral ideology itself'.

For a long time this equation between literature and morality ruled literary criticism. Retrospectively—and a tad condescendingly—called 'liberal humanism,' the worldview and artistic-cultural approach of those days now bears connotations of being politically uninformed, naïve and evasive, non-committal and essentialist. It has been situated by T.S. Eliot as the final historic moment on the 'Liberalist' line successively formed by Stoicism, Renaissance thought, Puritanism and the Romantic movement, all characterized by the "cult of personality" and a firm refutation of extra-individual authority (Murdoch 1958, 161). Liberal humanists elevated literature as the ultimate medium to impart knowledge about life, to convey humane values. The significance of great works was deemed timeless and unchangeable, mysteriously transcending the imperfections of their place and time of conception. By analogy, identity was conceptualized as a transcendent human essence, pre-existing external influences of language, experience and social relations, and therefore free. Consequently, literature was believed to address in the reader that which is essential in man. These values were to be discovered through a concentration on the concrete particulars of the individual work. Involvement with these particulars made readers aware of their own potentialities for fulfillment (Bruss 1982, 12).

A paradigmatic reading practice modeled after these beliefs is the in-depth analysis of the literary text as performed by Practical and New Criticism that dominated the Anglophone curriculum from the 1920s onward.[14] Heedless of socio-political, autobiographical and historical contexts, this approach was characterized by a devotion to textual detail. Autonomy from social studies and sciences warranted the dignity of literary studies, and the element of

[14] Practical Criticism originated in Cambridge in the 1920s, with as its most important practitioners I.A. Richards, William Empson, and F.R. Leavis. New Criticism, born at the same time in America, has as its most prominent figures John Crowe, William K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley and Cleanth Brooks.

literary presentation received more attention than an alleged 'message' the text had as its content. The difference between literary and average, communicative language was emphasized: literary texts were not to be read for information (on history or linguistics, or autobiographical slippages of the author)—this would mean to belittle the aesthetic experience by ignoring the specificity and autonomy of the work. The sort of experience these critics were after, was a "rapt, intransitive attention blocking all desire to test and categorize and dominating the will to act"; literary values included imaginative freedom and a Kantian disinterested contemplation (Bruss 1982, 11). The objective was to stay in touch with the sources of the responses of a naïve reader, to sustain a sense of amateurism. A practice of close reading served to stay true to the object, seeing it "as in itself it really is," as famously decreed by Arnold. The nature of the literary work was autotelic: it was seen as existing on its own terms, for itself, independent of extra-textual reality, creating a reality of its own.

1.3 The Rise of Theory

After three decennia of close reading, the sixties and seventies of the last century witnessed a cascade of drastic, far-reaching changes in the syllabi. An important catalyst for the fast pace of progress in university curricula that had looked the same for so long, was a changing notion of knowledge and truth.[15] For the first time, methods were questioned. All this was in turn part of a larger set of ideological and geo-political transformations going on since after the second World War. The sixties brought a decade of skepticism directed at institutions of knowledge, characterized by a general apprehension of ideological corruption (*Ibid.*16).[16] Theory was born at the historical moment when the humanities could not go on pretending to steer clear of ideological positions, to be uncontaminated by power. Numerous events that brought to life the horrific deeds that 'enlightened,' civilized beings were capable of, had incited an ardent questioning of the moral nature of mankind, giving rise to the idea that perhaps "the humanities *do not* humanize in any deep sense, that, given the immunities of

[15] According to Elizabeth Bruss, it is a fallacy to explain these shifts through developments internal to literary study, or any one discipline for that matter: they were not even restricted to the humanities, and had their equivalents in the natural and social sciences, where they manifested themselves as a crisis of epistemology, a challenge posed to a model of knowledge hitherto dominating, that was based almost entirely on perception (Bruss 1982, 15).

[16] This critical attitude had its precedents in all segments of societal life. Outside of the university, in culture as a whole, the façade of consent and uniformity collapsed, revealing conflicting interests. Institutions were indicted with bias and feared for being too autonomous; social, bureaucratic structures had gotten out of human control; rationalization was apprehended as technocratic violence, and industrial society critiqued. Marginalized groups struggled for recognition (Bruss 1982, 18-9).

mandarin and high bourgeois culture, they can *dehumanize*" (Steiner 2002, 151-52), by substituting a devotion to books for the care for other human beings. Academia as an institution no longer transcended these atrocities of the inhuman. There was a growing awareness of universities maintaining ties with military institutes, political movements and industrial structures (Eagleton 2003, 27).

A change in the population of the universities only added to this general skepticism.[17] When academic study became attainable for larger and more diverse, formerly underrepresented groups, some of the 'common sense' axioms and insights of humanistic study that had seemed 'natural' or 'logical' up until then, were challenged and overthrown as a result of the divergent backgrounds of the student population—a homogeneous, uniform discourse was problematized and became untenable (Hollinger 2006, 8). Students struggled for a higher level of participation in matters of organization, against rigid hierarchies and age-old traditions. Furthermore, the humanities became less exclusively 'Western,' more engaged with non-European fields of interest: after the second World War, exclusion of peoples had become a sore spot, and an awareness of discrimination was palpable (*Ibid*.2). This brought about a change in topics, fields and subfields that were in- and excluded.

The relations between literature and language studies, historicism, psychology and philosophy were re-established; everything that had carefully been excluded from literary discourse came back with a vengeance. Suddenly a need was felt for some new form of literary criticism able to envelop all these formerly excluded topics, to come to terms with a certain level of sophistication upheld by other disciplines. The conditions and standards for intellectual work were shifting, and literary study had to be transformed to meet these. What was desired was an air of 'rigor' or 'critique,' an equally sophisticated discourse (Hollinger 2006, 3).

The answer to this need is commonly referred to as 'theory,' defined by Eagleton as a practice of "critical self-reflection" (Eagleton 2003, 27).[18] Very basically put, theory entails

[17] For a detailed account of these changes, see Jonathan Scott Holloway's "The Black Scholar, the Humanities and the Politics of Racial Knowledge since 1945" and Rosalind Rosenberg's "Women in the Humanities: Taking their Place." Both essays are to be found in *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*.

[18] The term 'theory' may be slightly misleading, since it can be taken to imply a 'pre-theoretical' body of literary scholarship. Despite the efforts of liberal humanist scholars to present their methodologies as 'natural' and free of assumptions, in fact these were in no way less theoretical than 'theory': their postulations included all aforementioned beliefs about the universal, autonomous, autotelic character of literature, and the disinterestedness of the experience (Cf. Vaessens 2009, 38-9). An important difference with theory is, that liberal humanist schools did not make these axioms transparent, instead presented them as natural. For the same reasons, and "antitheory" position, a desire to study literature for its own sake, is untenable: it depends on

an incessant questioning, posing fundamental questions that preclude the inquiry to reach a fixed point at which final answers are provided (Bruss 1982, 20). The meta-character of theory is emphasized by Culler who describes it as "work that succeeds in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those in which it originated" (Culler 2007, 3), through a presentation of new, convincing ways of describing problems and phenomena of broad interest, concerning amongst other things "language, consciousness, meaning, nature and culture, the functioning of the psyche, the relations of individual experience to larger structures" (*Ibid*.4). The characterizations that theories offer in these fields go against 'commonsensical' knowledge of the universalist kind: instead, their reasoning is analytic, speculative and, as a rule, challenges disciplinary boundaries.

Arguably the most important realization that this innovative form of criticism brought home is that social identity is constructed in language. 'Man as transcendent essence' was traded in for man as *subject*, defined as "the individual in society as a language-using, social and historical entity" (Coward and Ellis 1977, 1). This insight initiated a radical demystification of the complex and mysterious conceptual territory of 'the human,' now analyzable as a process which plays a material role in culture, while being itself socially constituted. Understood as essential and transcendent, the individual was implicated as the constructing, creating agent of structures and systems of signification, of symbolism; in a sort of Copernican Revolution, as subject it is continuously constructed *by* them, subjectivity only experienced and created *in this process*. Thus, always "subject-ed," the subject was exiled as the center of our universe (*Ibid*.3-4). Ideology, then, is defined by Rosalind Coward and John Ellis as the way in which a subject is continuously produced in language as capable of self-representation, and thus able to act in a social totality. The function of ideology is the fixedness of those representations (*Ibid*.2).

Literature, co-de-centered in one sweep, is henceforth 'demystified,' interrogated for signs of incoherence and ideological subtext. Theorists try to bring to the surface the 'directing' codes and histories productive of the text, and acknowledge the multiple ways in which text is always in interaction with context in producing meaning and value (Bruss 1982, 19-22). Of major importance has been the realization that there exists no 'ideology-free' space from which humanities study can be performed: consequently, it is vital that scholars have a

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unexamined, disputable ideas of what literature and criticism are, or should be: "What theory demonstrates … is that there is no position free of theory, not even the one called "common sense" (Leitch et al. 2001, 1).

clear awareness of their own situatedness within ideological structures. This in stark contrast with liberal humanism, governed by what is retrospectively called the 'myth of transparence,' a belief in language as a neutral vehicle that smoothly transfers meaning, so that the language employed to express criticism does not suffer from theoretical assumptions (*Ibid*.27). The debunking of this myth rendered all language unstable; the text as 'concrete particular' dissolved.

By producing interdisciplinary questions and knowledge and through the "persuasive novelty of [its] descriptions" (Culler 1983, 9), literary theory has cut loose from literary studies, is no longer the handmaiden of literature: "theory attempts to embody the renovations directly and to itself become the literature that it foretells" (Bruss 1982, 24). Consequently, while "[f]ormerly the history of criticism was part of the history of literature (the story of changing conceptions of literature advanced by great writers), now the history of literature is part of the history of criticism" (Culler 1988, 116). Due to these developments, the 'literary' of literary theory—for instance, studies of the literariness of literature or the workings of literary genres and forms—has become less and less prominent, whereas literary values make an uncomfortable subject.

Since the rise of theory, literary studies has become more and more inclusive: theory opened the doors to other media, and the relations between literature and language studies, historicism and philosophy were re-established. But one thing that no longer fit in this new atmosphere of radicalism, skepticism and egalitarianism, was a notion of 'high' art and literature elevated and divorced from something implicitly regarded as 'low,' and the artificial separation of literature from other kinds of discourse. The social meaning of art had changed: no longer was it considered to free people from baseness and determinism, instead it had come to function as a claim to acquiescence, social retirement and acceptance of the status quo: of any status quo for that matter. Instead of promoting engagement to demand better conditions of living, as Eagleton subtly remarks, it had sufficed to "vicariously fulfill someone's desire for a fuller life by handing them *Pride and Prejudice*" (Eagleton 2001, 2247). The humanities had been "by implication tolerant of any world, no matter how ugly and unjust, so long as it allowed some small protective space where art could function" (Bruss 1982, 18). Beauty, which had once been valued as the highest of all earthly goods, was

identified as a source of discrimination and oppression.[19] Theorists came to read the category of 'Literature' as designating the symbolic capital of the old bourgeoisie, a form with little importance in the modern system of education.

1.4 The Lamentation of Values Lost, A Critique of Theory

It should therefore not come as a complete surprise that the rise of theory has been pointed at as the cause of the demise of the beautiful and the literary that some scholars so lament. More and more critics express a sense that theory has 'taken over' the study of literature. What theory has finally left us with, these critics seem to say, are tools to debunk works of literature with, to subject them to critical interrogation and dismantle all that is good, beautiful and pleasurable about them. According to them, politics and ideology are now seen as the only substantial things, whereas the values of truth and beauty and are deemed unattainable or flatly denied. As opposed to a deeply-felt esteem for the 'inspirational value' of great literature, Rorty characterizes the atmosphere of literary study these days as dry, sardonic 'knowingness,' "a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe", rendering one "immune to romantic enthusiasm" (Rorty 1998, 126). He intuits that the new generation of literary scholars has lost the ability to idolize in fear of ideology; instead they are trained to "clothe resentment in jargon" (*Ibid*.123).

Once the most prominent humanizer, literature has officially become "one discursive practice among many others, in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production" (Bernheimer 1993, 12). A far-reaching consequence of this more modest status is felt to be that expressions of art and culture are too often reduced to statements about the construction of categories of sex and gender, race and ethnicity, often coupled with a disregard for the particularities of the medium or art form itself and its specific effects (Buikema 2009, 7; Perloff 2000, 9). A literary text is thus foremost a *symptom* of culture, an index to a particular historical or cultural formation (*Ibid*.5).[20] In literary study driven by

[19] In fact, the whole connotation of the word 'discrimination' was stretched beyond recognition, as Susan Sontag remarks. 'Beauty' and aesthetic quality once derived their appeal from the fact that they were very selectively applicable, that they imposed hierarchy and exclusions. This former merit became the reason to reject these terms: "Discrimination, once a positive faculty (meaning refined judgment, high standards, fastidiousness), turned negative: it meant prejudice, bigotry, blindness to the virtue of what was not identical with oneself" (Sontag 2002, 8).

[20] In her book *Symptoms of Culture*, Marjorie Garber provides us with a useful definition of the polemics at hand, or what she calls the 'culture wars': she characterizes the debate as caused by a clash between the timeless, a-historical, universalizing, decontextualizing function of art as a *symbol* and the historically contingent, specific, and overdetermined function of art as a *symptom* (Garber 1998, 7). When regarded as a symbol, the object

ideology critique and focused on identity politics, the stress falls on textual content and extra-textual context. Everything is representation; however, the focus has shifted from *how*, to *what* art represents, from the signifier to the signified.

On a related note, aesthetics now brings with it connotations of moral and political reprehensibility, as something that should embarrass the self-respecting intellectual for its lack of scientific rigor. As Dennis Dutton expresses it, "[t]oday, loving beauty, like enjoying cigars or thick steaks, or having a Mexican maid, is something we are supposed to regard as politically awkward" (Dutton 2000, 2). Like the literary, beauty is politicized, and it has been completely cut off from its traditional cohorts, 'Truth' and 'Goodness'. Progressively, it merely signifies a term of esteem discharged by what Randy Boyagoda calls the "high priests of materialist criticism" (Boyagoda 2005, 878), because of its connotations of regression, elevating and preserving the standards of a privileged group.

This, finally, is what has informed aforementioned authors to take up the subject again, as a *defense* against its politicization (Scarry 1999, 57; Donoghue 2003, 30). What unites these views is the observation that there is no room for questions of value, autonomy and truth in the humanities. What has been lost along the way has been variously described: 'transcendence' for Scarry; 'shudders of awe' for Rorty; 'pleasure' for Perloff. They clamour for a change of attitude, a newfound respect for art to replace dryness and irony by passion and unpretentiousness, professionalism by 'amateurism' in the original sense of the word. Then, new space would be reserved for the art-loving public to participate in the discourse on beauty, reuniting academy with society. When 'knowing' expertise has been removed, art's redemptive powers can once again be enjoyed by everyone.

These battles have been fought, aesthetics and the literary are beginning to be reinstated as serious topics of scholarly enquiry, both evident in a return to questions of the aesthetic and in the employment of literary texts to question and refine theoretical conjecture. Remarkably, as mentioned earlier, the alleged ethical effects of beauty and literature are immediately smuggled in again through the back door. The defense of the specifically literary is mostly related not to the uniqueness of literary language, nor to its radical powers of disrupting meanings but to the engagement with otherness, ethical magnanimity and the equalization of social relations. None of the advocates of aesthetics stands up for beautiful

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should evoke an a-historical, universal truth; as a symptom it is thoroughly nestled in the world we live in, in certain historical occurrences of its own time and place, and the context of reception.

things or literature for their own sake: as we have seen, critics like Rorty and Todorov still insist that literature helps us to better understand human nature and the human condition, and thus fulfill our potential: "[s]ince the object of literature is the human condition itself, the person who studies it and understands it will become, not a specialist in literary analysis, but an *expert in being human*" (Todorov 2007, 31, emphasis mine). This, as well as Rorty proclaiming his "shudders of awe" for "great works of literature," makes one feel as if theory has never happened, and liberal humanism is still going strong. It reveals that indeed, as Scholes indicates, "humanists … have *wanted* to believe that taste entailed virtue, and many find it hard to abandon that belief, even now" (Scholes 2005, 728).

1.5 'Return' = Regression: Dangerous Territory

And this tendency is not without its problems, for we—scholars and students of art and literature—have arrived at a moment in time when we simply cannot maintain such beliefs. There are certain things that history has taught us, and a fresh dose of naiveté is impossible to attain. We have learnt that the appeal to any notion of a universal, generalized, allegedly all-inclusive humanity, even in good faith, is bound in reality to marginalize, disparage, oppress, or even deny the humanity of others. We have learnt that the aesthetic, the literary and often even the moral are inseparable from political, social and economic agendas. Posing our renewed interest in the aesthetic as a *return* to form, beauty or literature, entails a danger of setting up precisely a *return* to the oppressive side-effects for which these were once discarded. Whereas it is understandable that critics would want to perform close readings and meticulously analyze stylistic devices, we should not forget, as Derek Attridge warns us, that those methods have long ago been proved complicit with objectionable moral and political assumptions (Attridge 2008, 567)—charges grave enough not to allow a simple resurgence. What we cannot go back to are approaches that fall short of acknowledging the situatedness of scholars, writers and readers, that deal with texts as organic and autonomous unities, that evaluate while taking their own values for granted.

Theory has been hostile to forms of aesthetics regulating and governing the reading experience of texts, with a didactic focus on 'reading literarily,' or, as Tony Bennet has called it, "the aesthetic mode" (Bennet 1990, 183). Values are being passed on as 'the right' values, without a space for considering alternatives. What makes aesthetics dangerous, then, is the underlying assumption of a normatively prescribed 'right way' to experience art, which

implies multiple wrong ways ('misreadings') to make aesthetic judgments. In the process of learning these 'right ways,' readers can obtain a false sense of self-improvement (or 'fulfilment'): correcting and revising earlier readings and gradually being initiated into a dominant aesthetic community helps to construct an image of the self as enlightened, rational and cultured, implicitly and oft unintentionally excluding others as uneducated and irrational. When Rorty writes about an unquestioned 'greatness,' he inadvertently sustains these dogmas.

In short, humanities scholars, including literary critics, cannot return to a pre-theoretical marriage between the beautiful, or the literary, and the good. We should know by now that the effects of literature and art are utterly unpredictable: "arguments about the disruptive and emancipatory value of the avant-garde can always be countered by claims about the normalizing and policing functions of literary scenarios" (Culler 2007, 29). There is no direct link between the scrutiny of beautiful texts, personal virtues and conscientious citizenship (Cf. Harpham 2005, 25). What critics like Rorty and Todorov claim, in fact, when they write about the fulfillment of human potential, is that humanistic knowledge can have an *identifiable* effect on us, which is already one step too far.

When we consider the following fragments from Scarry's book, it should now be clear that, however passionately expressed, her exclamations on the subject fall prey to accusations of being retrograde and regressive, and not without reason.

> Sacred, lifesaving, having as precedent only those things which are themselves unprecedented, beauty ... incites deliberation ... and, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true. (Scarry 1999, 28, 31)

Further, Scarry goes beyond this elevation of beauty to Arnoldian heights when addressing its firm ties with, and promise of, justice:

> Beauty is ... a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver. As the beautiful thing confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life ... Beauty is pacific: its reciprocal salute to continued existence, its pact, is indistinguishable from the word for peace. And justice stands opposed to injury: 'injustice' and 'injury' are the same word. (*Ibid*.90, 107)

And all this to be effected simply by objects that reveal some—vaguely outlined—kind of symmetry. What Scarry does not acknowledge, however, is that beautiful symmetries necessitate certain particular identities. Since she avoids the subject of actual art-beholding humans and their differences, and thus presumes a universal identity pre-existing this "contract" with the work, the symmetry and equality between people inspired by beauty finally take on the form of a meeting between identities that are, in the last resort, the same: equal becomes identical. Here, too, the exclusions characteristic of liberal humanism keep resurfacing: what is excluded from this account is difference.[21] In Scarry's universe, beauty knows neither change nor diversity.[22] The symmetry thus enforced is not as innocent as one would gather from her naïve, beauty-loving descriptions, nor is it always desirable: "[t]urning to politics and human social relations, symmetry describes many well-ordered dictatorships" (Dutton 2000, 20). Symmetry is an unquestioned value. Unfortunately, Scarry is no more prepared to face this than Rorty and Todorov are willing to acknowledge that literature holds no promise of making us better persons.

Unlike Scarry, Donoghue does mention plenty of theorists who have preceded him on these grounds. In fact, he repeatedly invokes his critical adversaries who employ a notion of the aesthetic as bourgeois ideology, such as Theodor Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu, the latter having quite compellingly disclosed connections between aesthetic preferences and class distinction (Cf. Bourdieu 1987). Apparently though, Donoghue has decided to retain a neutral ground when addressing these theorists, and never acknowledges the tension between Kant, whom he generally agrees with, and Bourdieu. While he concedes that beauty does not necessarily generate virtue, and he shows at least some awareness of its oppressive sides, he simply prefers not to go into it, and settles the matter by stating, referring to the slaves that built the Parthenon, "I can't feel guilty. I didn't whip those slaves into their compulsion. Nor can I regret that the Parthenon has at least in part survived" (Donoghue 2003, 6). Again, this attitude can be reputed for false naiveté, when we consider that aesthetics continues to have unwholesome side-effects for others.

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[21] The universalizing thus effectuated is supported by Scarry never mentioning the names of the critics she feels the need to defend beauty against; moreover, her universe is unfamiliar with the possibility of conflicting tastes.

[22] Scarry has been reproached by cultural critic Rita Felski for being blind and deaf to modernity in her selection of beautiful things: "her archly archaic prose conjures up a genteel, inbred world, where we are all surrounded by exquisite *objets d'art*; a chance encounter with a flower begets a Rilkean moment of ineffable plenitude. … It is as if Duchamp and Disney, camp and cyberpunk, muzak and MTV had never happened. The challenge, surely, is to think what beauty might mean in the light of this history rather than to push it out of sight" (Felski 2005, 36).

De Bolla routinely adopts a position that might seem to avoid these exclusions of difference, taking the trouble at many points to dismiss accounts of aesthetic experience based on a normative understanding of beautiful objects (De Bolla 2001, 18). Instead, he postulates the experience at a point between beautiful object and perceiving subject, involving a feeling produced by the work of art, but simultaneously felt as a private affect ‘‘knowable only to me’’ (*Ibid*.14-5). As indicated at the beginning of this section, in de Bolla’s view, the art work is a presence that teaches us the proper attitude towards it (*Ibid*.43, 47, 87)—not too distanced, nor overly probing—for the ‘act of witnessing’ to take place, which is very personal (*Ibid*.139), yet ‘inclusive’ and ‘involving’ (*Ibid*.40). But the reason that witnessing as a repeatable mode of perception can be so inclusive in the first place, is that this idea of inclusiveness and involvement is ultimately based upon an assumed identity that is *shared*. That is why de Bolla can move straight from the highly personal experience to a solidifying communal discussion of the attitudes and perspectives communicated by the work with peers (*Ibid*.40). As Mark Canuel summarizes the cloaked argument, “readers, viewers, or auditors model themselves after the objects of aesthetic appreciation, which are like people themselves in their embodiment and encouragement of *identical* attitudes” (Canuel 2006, 86, my emphasis). Far more implicitly than Scarry’s account of beauty, de Bolla’s still presupposes a faceless, non-specified ‘self’ that is confronted with art, thus providing no space for differences.

History gives us plenty of grounds to be hesitant about beauty-justice correlations. However, history does not really have a place in these ‘new’ theories. Beauty is de-contextualized, theorists who have indicted it are being avoided. These endeavors to reinstate the experience of the beautiful seem to be driven by deeply nostalgic feelings and endorse a-historical notions of the past. Unfortunately, the old debates cannot all of a sudden be transcended. While critics joyfully go around celebrating beauty for its ethical or social relevance, its effects of justice for all, with an attitude as if they were the first to come up with this, their ideas are still very much tangled up with and tainted by the problems they choose to circumvent. They remain informed by an old normative logic, an understanding of selfhood and aesthetics that has not changed much since the nineteenth century, thus unintentionally reiterating the same old inclusions and exclusions. Now we need Alexander Nehamas to remind us of

> [t]he hard truth … that we love beauty *even though* it conflicts with goodness and justice: we admire the Greeks because they made beautiful art, not because their art made them good people. Until we can explain how beauty and injustice can characterize a single society, how a single individual can be both devoted to beauty and capable of evil, no abstract philosophical argument of the sort Scarry offers to connect beauty and justice can possibly succeed. (Nehamas 2000, 397, emphasis mine)

The difficulties of explaining this have been reinforced by the unwillingness of many critics engaged in polemics on these matters, to take a long hard look at the other side, to consider opinions diametrically opposed to their own. And understandably so, since there is always more at stake when we theorize beauty: as materialist or poststructuralist critics attack it, it is not beauty or aesthetics itself that is attacked, but its oppressive side-effects and discriminating institutions. When beauty is defended, its possibilities for ethical self-improvement and social justice are. While the interrogators of beauty mostly refuse to believe the aesthetic experience to be 'real' or unalienated in the first place, enthusiasts see the dangers of aesthetics as having really nothing to do with aesthetics, with objects and experiences themselves: the blame befalls *mis*judgments. The cavernous gap that has materialized between these ways of thinking has become to seem unbridgeable.[23]

1.6 The Aesthetic Experience Revisited

Does this mean that the subjects of aesthetics and ethics can never be readdressed, that we need to remain silent, be censured or feel guilty forever? Certainly not. In spite of the dangers and pitfalls of universalization and exclusion lying in ambush in every theorizing or programmatic approach to aesthetics, the conviction that art has the ability to bring us something unique and worthwhile, sustains. However, some effort will have to be put into fitting 'old' notions to modern research, to contextualize and historically situate them.

[23] However irreconcilable these views, as Raymond Williams has explained, limiting ourselves to any one of them with exclusion of the other would ultimately sustain reader nor theorist: "If we are asked to believe that all literature is "ideology," in the crude sense that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the communication or imposition of "social" or "political" meanings and values, we can only, in the end, turn away. If we are asked to believe that all literature is "aesthetic," in the crude sense that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the beauty or language of form, we may stay a little longer but will still in the end turn away" (*Marxism and Literature* 155, cited in Bérubé 2005, 10). And this shows when we leave the terrain of manifests and take a look the practice of criticism: then the gap does not seem half as grave as the polemics suggests. There are always enough counterexamples of research in the disciplines of cultural, gender en postcolonial studies with attention to form, literariness and aesthetics. As Rosemarie Buikema reminds us, in these fields, the error of an insufficient attention to form has already been identified and corrected (Buikema 2010, 13; Cf. Culler 2007.

Reflecting on the beauty of literary texts, as Irene Kacandes insists, we must "ask when, how, and why the object was granted such a status and by whom" (Kacandes 2004, 159). We cannot accept aesthetic objects as transcendent or abstract, they are necessarily rooted in *this* world, and susceptible to its flaws and injustices, in which indeed they often partake. This makes it tremendously important to avoid generalization or simplification.

We have seen that the 'return' to beauty, aesthetics and literature in the humanities, connected to an emphasis on potential ethical advantages, is primarily meant to counter the prevalence of theory over literature and art, and the consequent focus on identity politics in scholarship. I have argued that a revision of these themes should not entail a revisiting of less critical times, especially when it comes to the moral virtues aesthetics could convey.

In order to come to a rethinking aesthetics and its ethical corollaries in a way that is not haunted by the repressed specter of long-discarded liberal humanist assumptions, we need to 'think through' a notion of the aesthetic that does not revisit the nineteenth-century ideal of a cultivating, civilizing and humanizing force guiding us to proper readings and the right judgments of taste and supporting decent conduct, but nevertheless opens up spaces for theorizing a relation between aesthetics and ethics. In what follows I will work towards opening up a new conception of the ethical effects of aesthetics that defies inclinations to an unknown, harmonious totality in ethics, and grounds aesthetics firmly in life.

Any conceptualization of the aesthetic experience has to resist the temptation to reduce differences to sameness, as argued. Instead of an experience leading the subject to a different sphere, transcending the material and the contingent, the social or the everyday, the experience of art is situated *in life*, related to other experiences. The art work, far from an being an organic unity fully independent from extra-aesthetic reality, is materially grounded in society.[24] As Iris Murdoch points out, "[i]t is a fallacy which has worked confusion in modern philosophy that the only alternative to a sort of Bloomsbury art-for-art's-sake theory of art is a sinister theory of didactic art. .. Art is for life's sake … or else it is worthless" (Murdoch 1959, 218). In order to move to a new configuration of 'old' notions from the aesthetic tradition combined with insights from theory, which takes all these 'disclaimers' into consideration, I deem it fruitful to make a short detour through the aesthetic theory of

[24] Moreover, in what follows after a detour to Kantian aesthetics, I do not wish to specifically invest in a theory for the notion of 'beauty'. This because on the one hand it is a restricting concept, which denotes only one of the possible aesthetic effects of art, and to many contemporary and historical art forms it is not applicable, and on the other hand it is not confined to art. This blurring of categories could serve to add to aesthetic discourse an 'absoluteness' we want to move away from.

Immanuel Kant. His ideas on the beautiful, the sublime and the good are still very influential in conceptualizations of the relation between aesthetics and ethics. A reiteration of his main points can clarify which notions we want to elaborate upon, and which we need to leave behind. Through a rendition of the critique of Kantian aesthetics posed by the writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch it will become clear that the universalizing tendencies of recent theories of the aesthetic such as those set out by Scarry, Donoghue and De Bolla, do have their precedents in this tradition.

1.7 Universalizing Tendencies in The Third Critique

'Working through' traditional ways of conceiving of aesthetic experiences, we almost inevitably stumble upon the philosophy of Kant. After Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten baptized the aesthetic tradition in 1735 as *epistêmê aisthetikê*, or the science of what is sensed and imagined,[25] this body of philosophical enquiry soon came to centre around the notions of beauty and taste: a development largely informed by *The Critique of Judgment* (1790).

The Kantian aesthetic judgment is subdivided into the beautiful and the sublime. In the realm of the beautiful, Kant discriminates between free and dependent beauty. He reserves the second term for the beauty of things that "presuppose a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection" (Kant 1964, 55). Examples include the beauty of a person, a horse, or a building (*Ibid*.55). The *true* judgment of beauty, which is free beauty, entails a concordance or synthesis between imagination and understanding in the act of mentally grasping a sensuous object that is not brought under any determinate concept (*Ibid*.54-60). The resultant judgment cannot be proven right by any rule we can phrase.

The truly beautiful in Kant's account, then, is fully independent from any interest: the attitude of the beholder confronted with free beauty is characterized by 'disinterestedness,' an "exercise in selfless attention" (Slater 2005, 6). Judgment, here, is immediate, unmediated; the pleasure resulting from the sensation is inextricably bound up with the synthesis between the faculties of imagination and understanding. Or rather, it *is* this synthesis, the act of putting together a conceptless representation.

[25] Baumgarten, *Meditationes* §CXVI, 86-7, cited in Guyer 2008. This was only a nominal birth of the discipline: aesthetics as a part of the whole project of philosophy is usually conceived of as starting with Plato's *Republic* and Artistotle's *Poetic*.

Unlike beauty, the sublime is connected to the emotions. 'Sublime,' in Kant's understanding, does not designate an object. It is a feeling resulting from a conflict between imagination and reason, provoked by vast, powerful and terrifying, or formless, nature, when beheld from a safe distance. Kant defines it as an emotion which "renders … intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of the sensibility" (Kant 1964, 80), stirred by "an object … the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas" (*Ibid*.90).

For Kant, reason always seeks after systematic totality, and strives to avoid incompleteness and juxtaposition. In an encounter with the vastness of nature, imagination struggles to fulfill this requirement, only to fall short. As a result, the sublime entails a mixed feeling, consistent of anguish caused by imagination's failure to grasp the spectacle, and elation of consciousness for the absoluteness of reason's requirement: after all, this requirement for totality momentarily surpasses the attainments of the imagination. This mixed experience of sublimity is for Kant connected to *Achtung*, the feeling of respect for the moral law: "[t]he feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea that is a law for us, is respect" (*Ibid*.80). *Achtung* is an experience of agony due to the impediment of our sensuous character by moral obligations, combined with exultation in the realization of our freedom to do what reason asks of us: the moral freedom of rationality (Cf. Johnson 2008).

Both beauty and sublimity are connected to this idea of freedom, that *is* the good, albeit in fundamentally different ways. The beautiful is related analogically to the good, it symbolizes it. The judgment of taste is an affective counterpart of the moral judgment: both are free, independent and disinterested. The sublime, on the other hand, is more closely related to the moral realm: here a prominent role in the experience is reserved for reason, the 'moral will' itself. Furthermore, in contrast to the contemplative, restful character of the experience of beauty, that of the sublime, like the will in moral judgment, stirs the mind of the beholder. The relation here is not *analogical*: the freedom of the sublime *is* moral freedom, although it is not intentional, not directed at anything; rather exercising itself, "intuiting itself in an exultant manner" (Murdoch 1959, 209).

In her essay "The Sublime and the Good", Murdoch argues for a loosening of the Kantian conception of 'true' beauty, since it excludes more of what is normally taken to be art than it includes. She takes issue with the alleged instantaneous character of the experience—

"the art work is not given, it is also thought" (*Ibid*.210)—and the prescribed non-conceptual nature of the experience of pure beauty. The primary value attached to 'purity' in the Kantian experience makes for a small range of paradigmatically beautiful objects such as flowers, "free patterns, lines aimlessly intertwining," the plumage of many birds ("the parrot, the hummingbird, the bird of paradise"), a "number of crustacean", "designs a la grecque, foliage for framework on wall-papers" and "all music that is not set to words" (Kant 1964, 61, 35, 54). Judging from Kant's own examples, the free character of beauty seems to stem from its freedom from particularity and complexity.

Murdoch points to a similar desire for uniformity in the Kantian sublime. As discussed, this experience occurs when the imagination is unable to grasp the totality that reason calls for. This totality is not known or presented to us; nevertheless the faculty of reason succeeds in constructing an outline. The 'wholeness' thus intuited remains abstract, non-historical, non-social, and quasi-mathematical (Murdoch 1959, 211). The feeling of the sublime entails only a part of this totality grasped by the imagination, while the lion's share remains in the dark, anticipated but not known as such—only "dreamt by reason", as Murdoch describes it (*Ibid*.213). Not unsurprisingly, this experience is exclusively brought about by nature, which Kant's philosophy conceives of as free from the historical, the social and the human. The totality which makes itself felt in the experience is empty, rendering the freedom thus experienced an *empty* freedom, as Murdoch asserts: "the fruitless aspiring demand for some sort of impossible total perceptual comprehension of nature" (*Ibid*.214).

Now we can see the consonances between Kant's beautiful and his sublime, his aesthetics and his ethics: freedom of experience in all these cases entail a freedom from the particular, from history. 'Pure' means 'not tainted by human particularity'. Kant has aspired to make moral judgment a timeless form of rational activity, and respect for the other, in his ethics, is a respect for the demand for an abstract, empty wholeness that we share with this other: "Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts" (*Ibid*.215). As long as we are all moral and rational we are the same at heart, and this is the human core that somehow transcends history, that touches upon a harmonious dimension intuited by the moral will. This, in the end, is what Kantian freedom warrants in Murdoch's reading: "[f]reedom is an ability to rise out of history and grasp a universal idea of order which we then apply to the sensible world" (*Ibid*.215).

Here we have the paradigmatic model for the relation between aesthetics and ethics, still dominant in the contemporary theories discussed. It is in this respect that beauty is taken to be the sensuous analogy of the good, indeed a symbol: both the aesthetic and the moral judgment are pure, simple and independent, a response to something abstract that stands apart from the complex and diffuse materials our world exists of, from the individual. The ethical imperatives Kant values as grasped in our *sensus communis* are as simple as flowers and wallpaper patterns, excluding complicated situations.

If a renewed attention to aesthetics is to escape a reinforcement of some of these main tenets of homogenizing the experience, it needs to be invested with an attention to the *singularity* of aesthetics, to the role of form, to unpredictability and ambiguity. This would also mean that an approach is called for with room for the contextual specifics of the experience. Moreover, the notion of correct or proper response is better left aside for now, in favor of an awareness of the complexity, incoherence and changeability of both culture and subject. The experience of an art work is different every time: it differs cross-culturally, historically: even in the same person from one day to the next. This becomes clear when we treat the experience as an event, concurrently irreducibly singular *and* general, as an exposure of a complex of imperceptible influences that constitute the subject beyond the horizons of subjectivity, beyond habitual perceptions.

From aesthetics and ethics as a universalizing move from the particular to a transcendent realm of 'purity' and wholeness, we will have to move to an understanding of the aesthetic experience as singular relating that needs no external justification, is never 'for the sake of' anything, while at the same time being firmly grounded *in life*—what Susan Sontag envisioned decades ago when she called out for a 'new sensibility' about art: "The Matthew Arnold notion of culture defines art as the criticism of life—this being understood as the propounding of moral, social and political ideas. The new sensibility understands art as the extension of life—this being understood as the representation of (new) modes of vivacity" (Sontag 1965a, 299).

In this thesis, I will propose a notion of literary aesthetics as a singular, defamiliarizing experience of a certain form, and ethics as an asymmetrical, non-instrumental responsibility. In order to get there, I will first have to look into a wholly different route from literature to ethics: the traditional way of conceiving of the ethical effects of literature as caused by

narrative, identification and empathy with characters, which I will critique chapter two, and to which I will pose a corrective by defending and investigating literary style in chapter three.

Chapter 2: On Empathy as Self-projection: Ian McEwan's *Saturday* as 'slice of mind' novel

[w]e may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own.

–Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 1959.

Via Ian McEwan's take on the ethical task of the novel as 'empathy in his purest form,' I give a short introduction to the notion of empathy as the ethical potential of literature as it figures in literary criticism, most notably with scholars associated with 'ethical criticism'. What follows is a reading of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005) in the framework of (1) the 'nostalgic' tendencies laid bare in the first chapter, of making aesthetics and ethics into a gesture towards symmetry to console us in the face of ethical ambiguity, and (2) the notion of empathy, which will be assessed both as a theme in the novel, and as informing the novel as a whole. Finally, I will offer a critique of empathy as a 'tool' for ethical improvement through literature, which I will unmask as a reduction of otherness to self-sameness.

2.1: Evil as 'Failure of the Imagination'

As reflected in the introduction to this thesis, it can be said that a renewed desire for 'objective' values has arisen in the aftermath of 9/11. In *Saturday*, McEwan quotes Fred Halliday[26] who categorizes the primary "root cause" of the crisis induced by the attacks as an "intellectual" one, exposing the problems of a deficient in education and democracy in certain countries as the catalyst of hatred for the Western world and a valuing of conspiracy over rational critique. In order for the Western world to cope with the consequences, "reason and insistence on universal values and criteria of evaluation will, more than ever, be essential. The centre has to hold" (Head 2007, 179).[27]

[26] Henry Perowne, reflecting on the anti-war march, holds the opinion that the attacks had "precipitated a global crisis that would, if we were lucky, take a hundred years to resolve" (*Sat* 32-3). In *Ian McEwan*, Dominic Head identifies this quotation as coming from Halliday's book.

[27] Halliday, Fred. *Two Hours that Shook the World, September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences*, 2002, 24. Cited in Head 179. This short passage is a poignant example of *a* (Western) set of moral principles 'universalized' to mean morality in general, unable to address everything that falls outside of it: religious moralities, fundamentalist moralities, all conflicting stances that culminate into morality-clashes.

More subtly, McEwan himself has risen to the challenge of formulating a response to this iconic cataclysm of the twenty-first century, lending his voice to the debate in an essay in *The Guardian* no later than 15 September 2001. In this essay he makes an appeal to an altogether different species of universal values, namely love and imagination. Here, he charges the terrorists with a "failure of the imagination" (McEwan 2001, 16) and a lack of the natural capacity for empathy that makes us human: "If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. … Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity" (*Ibid*.15).

Empathy, projecting the self in another's situation, in order to fully comprehend it and come to an understanding of this other person, is what ethical behavior is founded on, so the argument goes. Accessing such a terrible event through the news does not allow for comprehension. We can only begin to understand the meaning of it as we "fantasize ourselves into the events" and pose the question "What if it was me?" (*Ibid*.12). This, "to think oneself into the minds of others," McEwan has it, is what makes morality possible, it is the "essence of compassion" (*Ibid*.15). Engaging with ethical events in which we are not directly experientially implicated incites us to fashion imaginative reconstructions, as he illustrates: "you are under the bedclothes, you are trying to sleep, and you are crouching in the brushed-steel lavatory at the rear end of the plane, whispering a final message to your loved one" (*Ibid*.13). This imaginative exercise, the reader will have noticed, is not far removed from the project of writing literary prose. The novel, McEwan insists elsewhere, is "empathy in its purest form," for it allows us to inhabit the mind of the other and experience what it feels like to be this other.[28]

2.2 Literature as Empathically Inhabiting the Mind of the Other

As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, suchlike proposals of the ethical impact of literature are much-heard; as an example I have argued that Todorov goes to questionable lengths in his pronouncements on the merits of reading. In "What is literature for?", he elaborates on the work of philosopher Richard Rorty, who sees the redemptive value of literature in the way it diminishes our egotism or self-satisfaction, the illusion of self-

[28] Cited by Steven Vervaet from an interview with McEwan in the Belgian magazine *Humo* on http://www.rpe.ugent.be/Vervaet.html

sufficiency. Reading literary works, according to Rorty, is like meeting new people, "with the important difference that we can discover right away what they are like inside" (Todorov 2007, 27). Through these encounters, Todorov has it, literature "lets each of us fulfill our human potential" (*Ibid*.17). He locates literature's power to attain this understanding in the way we attempt to become familiar with the ideas, feelings and viewpoints of characters, and as such this can train the reader's humanity, make her an "expert in being human" (*Ibid*.31).

This can be seen as the traditional conception of the relation between literature and ethics. The prevailing way of thinking about this relation is exemplified in the work of certain philosophers and literary theorists who believe, in short, that reading literature can incite us to sympathize with humans in general, as literary reading contributes to a more full-fledged, balanced and complex definition of what it is to be human. In a well-known work on the relation between literature and ethics, *Poetic Justice* (1995), philosopher Martha Nussbaum states that a good judge should be able to take an empathic stance in complex ethical situations, and that reading literary texts provides an excellent training to this end. The way she sees it, "[l]iterary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protecting stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront—and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation" (Nussbaum 1995, 6). The ethical benefit that literature can bring us, according to her, is the experience of living vicariously through the (textual) other while retaining a distance, enabling the reader to reflect on complex situations. This is thought to expand our capacities of ethical judgment in real life, because we obtain an understanding of the uniqueness of every situation.

This approach to literature which is founded on the belief that the appreciative reading of exemplary works of literary fiction can help us lead better lives is called ethical criticism, and besides Nussbaum, it has Wayne Booth as its most renowned advocate. For these scholars, the ethical is the realm enveloping all answers to the—evidently Aristotelian—question of 'How should we live?' These philosophers employ for the novel the metaphor of a 'friend,' in that it activates the imagination and emotions, confronting them with characters whose lives are manifestly different from their own and making them aware with the fact that there can of the multi-perspectivity of every situation (Nussbaum 1995, 5). Ethical considerations should be founded on as comprehensive and full-fledged a notion of the people involved, their stories and motivations. In training our judgments, empathy, the "imaginative

exercise of putting oneself in that person's place" (Nussbaum 2001, 342), supports an extension of our ethical concerns. Whereas all humans have a natural propensity for compassion towards their family and friends, literature can encourage us to understand the concerns of strangers in the same manner. This, it is her conviction, ultimately leads to a better treatment of the other:

> if you really vividly experience a concrete human life, imagine what it's like to live that life, and at the same time permit yourself the full range of emotional responses to that concrete life, you will (if you have at all a good moral start) be unable to do certain things to that person. Vividness leads to tenderness, imagination to compassion. (Nussbaum 1990, 209)

In a similar vein, Noël Carroll considers literature—or more precisely, narrative fiction, as will become clear—to be the 'ethical' medium par excellence, by virtue of the numerous gaps enclosed in it, waiting to be filled in by the reader (Carroll 1998, 419-20). Among the feelings and thoughts employed to make the story intelligible are ethical ones, *antecedent* ethical concepts to be precise: "moral emotions and judgements that narratives typically call upon audiences to fill in are generally already in place. Most narrative artworks do not teach audiences new moral emotions or new moral tenets. They activate pre-existing ones" (*Ibid*.229). In "enlarg[ing] our powers of recognition with respect to abstract virtues and vices" (Carroll 2001, 286), works of literature function as a kind of laboratory, an ethical playground in which we can experiment to our hearts' content. The focal point of these experiences is to be the literary character, with whom we empathize or indentify (Nussbaum, Todorov), whose lives we "try out" (Booth) or whose experiences we simulate or "empathically reenact" (Currie).

This way of reading demands an accompanying approach to, and conception of, the literary character as moral agent, a view fiercely defended by Frank Palmer. According to him, it is not nonsensical to conceive of characters as real persons, instead of 'mere' symbols, devices or tools, as structuralists and poststructuralists are wont. We engage in ethical approval or disapproval of fictional characters after "entering into their minds" (Palmer 1992, 211), we even blame them and condemn them for certain actions. This, Palmer calls a fitting 'moral attitude'—forming these attitudes increases our understanding of the meaning and significance of real ethical life.

In empirical studies on the relation between the reading of literary texts and ethical reflection described in his dissertation, tellingly titled *Moral Laboratory* (1998), Frank

Hakemulder has succeeded in finding some preliminary empirical confirmation of this idea of literature as providing ethical 'training'. An important factor in the experiments conducted is the possibility of the reader adopting a literary character as role model ('role-taking'), in which case the reader's emotional response to the character's experience is empathic, which Hakemulder understands to mean that her own memories of experiences similar to those described in the text are generated by identification with another psyche (Hakemulder 1998, 71-5). It is hypothesized that this way of reading can improve the reader's ability to conceive of the emotions and motivations of others, heightening her sensitivity to ethical dilemmas (*Ibid*.21-5).[29] For empathy to be invoked, however, the reader's initial moral judgment of the character has to be positive (*Ibid*.288). Hakemulder carefully points out the possibility that when reading about individuals belonging to a certain (marginal) group, a reader is likely to transfer her moral judgments of the characters onto the way she feels about members of that group in real life (*Ibid*.112-14). And finally, the results of these experiments learn us that 'role-taking' or identification can be of importance in the assessment of the consequences of possible future deeds of the reader—in the example given, readers tend to resolve never to commit adultery, after having read a text in which the cheating protagonist meets an unhappy end (*Ibid*.138-39).

2.3 Self-enclosed Perfection and Nostalgia for Ignorance in *Saturday*

A similar ethical mission, then, can be said to inform *Saturday* on two levels: as a novel it grants us the experience of vicariously living a day in the mind of Henry Perowne, neurosurgeon, and on a narrative level, this Perowne in *his* turn struggles to obtain an empathetic attitude to the other. In this enterprise he is obstructed by his lack of literary sensibility. Although his daughter Daisy keeps striving to educate this sensibility, Perowne still seems to grant literature a referential function only.[30] The novel is "too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of

[29] It should be noted, as Hakemulder carefully does, that no exact information is obtained as to *what* it is in literature that causes the 'ethical' effect in readers, and if these are long-term effects, or only discernible right after reading (Hakemulder 1998, 286-87).

[30] From *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* he has learned "that adultery is understandable but wrong, that 19th-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so" (*Sat* 67).

human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzlingly achieved" (*Sat* 68), not abstract enough,[31] lacking the 'purity' of science and music. Old questions about the purpose and value of literature are readdressed in a contemporary setting, lending them a renewed moral urgency: who needs stories to defamiliarize the world when "[t]he times are strange enough. Why make things up?" The world that Perowne tries to grasp is too complex, too strange as it is: "it interests him less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained" (*Sat* 66).

To come to such an explanation, Perowne approaches the world with rationalism and pragmatism as his armature. As "professional reductionist" he is positive that the "invisible folds and kinks of character" have been "written in code, at the level of molecules" that "resist any humane attempts to change individuals' fates" (*Sat* 272). The mechanics of the brain are clear to him, whereas the complexities of the individual consciousness remain a mystery. While he unmasks religious faith to be simply "a problem, or an idea, of reference. An excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance" (*Sat* 272), his own devotion to science does not give him the solution to this 'problem'. The brain does not teach him about ethics, and his anxious feelings about justifying his prosperity, a debt to faceless others still to be paid, his desire for an impossible measure of control over his life and mind, all point to similar 'reference' problems: Perowne himself is struck for an answer vis-à-vis the friction between his personal life and the world around him. There are no pre-made guidelines for what it means to be 'human' now; even science falls short. Seeing the world in an Arnoldian fashion, 'as in itself it really is,' has become practically unfeasible.

Therefore it is unsurprising that Perowne's pragmatic ideal of simplicity bestows him with a relentless sense of ambivalence concerning global politics and ethics—he "can't feel, as the members [of the anti-war march] themselves probably can, that they have an exclusive hold on moral discernment" (*Sat* 73). Ethical responsibility, even more muddled, messy, imperfect and tainted by 'the human' than literature, makes him uneasy, enforces his inclination to *turn away*. Still, as Immanuel Levinas has reminded us, "the other haunts our ontological existence and keeps the psyche awake, in a case of vigilant insomnia. Even though we are ontologically free to refuse the other, we remain forever accused, with a bad

[31] Evoking Attridge's remark that "the literary is too impure, without fixed borders, liable to contamination and grafting, an event rather than an entity or concept", without recognizing the merits inherent in this (Attridge 2004, 13).

conscience" (Kearney 1995, 64). This is an apt description of Perowne's state of anxiety. He refuses to engage with it, opts for consolation, for a refuge in a withdrawn liberalism. The biography of Darwin his daughter made him read "[a]t times … made him comfortably nostalgic for a verdant, horse-drawn, affectionate England" (*Sat* 6). At these moments of reflection on his life and the responsibilities of his position in society, he often flees in a longing for simpler times, when one could permit an attitude of careless naiveté:

> How restful it must once have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing super-natural force had allotted people to their stations in life and not to see how the belief served your prosperity—a form of anosognosia—a useful psychiatric term for lack of awareness of one's own condition. Now we think we do see, how do things stand? After the ruinous experiments of the lately deceased century, after so much vile behavior, so many deaths, a queasy agnosticism has settled around these matters of justice and redistributed wealth. No more big ideas. (*Sat* 74)

And this is one rule he seems to embrace: Perowne passionately indulges in the small pleasures of life. In fact, he may be a materialist when it comes to brain and character, and he may miss the point of literature, but he is very receptive for aesthetic pleasure. Bach and Coltrane he bestows with "a ruthless, nearly, inhuman element of self-enclosed perfection" (*Sat* 68), and he admires the work of Rothko, Parker and Hodgkin, revealing a preference for the abstract, non-representational in art, a Kantian 'free' or pure beauty. What he stands truly in awe of is *perfection*, void of the uncertainties that belong to the domain of the human. He finds it in the brain, in the beauty of the tentorium, the arachnoid, the globus palladus (*Sat* 11, 57, 227): while performing the "*art* of neurosurgery" (*Sat* 255, my emphasis) he inhabits the "pure present… that dissolves all sense of time" (*Sat* 266), with "the pleasure of knowing precisely what he is doing" (*Sat* 250). He finds it in the "biological hyperspace" of sexual intercourse with his wife (*Sat* 51), in a game of squash, and even in his everyday surroundings.[32] In art as well as in life, Perowne admires harmony, orderliness, flawless mechanisms, configurations where every element has its *own place*. What Perowne admires can be described as a Kantian purposive purposelessness: the five hundred pages of the *Origin of Species* amount to the most beautiful story imaginable, because it all 'fits'. Science and

[32] The city is described as "a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work" (*Sat* 5).

abstract art—free and pure—are juxtaposed to literature and the complex moral world, muddled and flawed.[33]

Located in art, nature and the human brain, this harmony is least likely to be found where *subjectivities* come into play. As Perowne hears Theo play his latest song, it makes him wonder about the ever failing worldly efforts directed to peace, whereas "only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalisingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes ... And here it is now, a coherent world, everything fitting at last"—"in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself" (*Sat* 172, 171). He connects the transcendence, the perfect clarity and harmony in his son's music to a balance and harmony absent from life. And since this larger cohesion will always remain a utopia, he withdraws and sticks to his private joys, subscribing to the philosophy of his eighteen year old son:

> When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in—you know, a girl I've just met, or this song we're doing with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto— think small. (*Sat* 34-5)

This strategic 'small thinking' is connected to Perowne's nostalgia for more naïve times, and his tendency to close off his consciousness to otherness. Pondering the alleged feelings of the fish he will prepare for dinner, he contemplates these issues: "[t]his is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant peoples are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish" (*Sat* 127). Perowne will not comply and opts for ignorance: "If they're alive and in pain, he isn't to know" (*Sat* 177). His empathy is selective and does not travel, there's 'not enough love to round': "[f]or all the discerning talk, it's the close at hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force. And what you don't see ... That's why in gentle Marylebone the world seems so entirely at peace" (*Sat* 127). There are no guidelines, no terms of selection, determining to whom we extend our humane feelings: Animals? Murderers? The mentally deranged? Terrorists? But once we allow empathy to trickle down in our consciousness, its appeals are bound to increase: mercy, responsibility, are inherently non-selective. And as

[33] The description of Perowne's operation on Baxter at the end of the novel comes closest to an encounter with the singularity of a work of art. Significantly, McEwan has revealed that to him, surgery functioned as a way to write about writing, otherwise impossible: "I knew I wanted to write a major operation at the end but it would really be about writing, about making art" (Vida 2005, 224).

Derrida reminds us in *The Gift of Death*, this boundlessness of responsibility is essential: there are infinite responsibilities, and they are all absolute and immediate in their demands (Derrida 2008, 72). In the real world there are consequences to actions, even the ones we do not take—ethical responsibility makes demands on us before we choose to withhold it, to *not* relate, as Perowne will find out a little later.

2.4 Substituting the Other: *Saturday* and its Fantasies of Redemption

Now is the time to look at the sequence of events leading up to *Saturday*'s conclusion. After a minor car accident, where his diagnosis of Baxter's Huntington's disease—"biological determinism in its purest form" (*Sat* 93)—saves Henry from a beating, Baxter is humiliated and bent on revenge. He follows Henry home, holds his family hostage with a knife, and threatens to rape his daughter Daisy, whom he commands to read a poem from the proof copy of her own collection. Unable to undergo this ultimate humiliation, on a hint of her grandfather she recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," which she knows by heart, instead. On hearing this Victorian poem, Baxter undergoes a dramatic mood swing. Ecstatic and genuinely moved, he demands a second reading, whereupon he undergoes an instant transformation—despite the poem's gloomy message, he is spellbound by its beauty, which occasions in him a metamorphosis "from lord of terror to amazed admirer" (*Sat* 223). The aesthetic experience fills him with a new zest for life: he now wants to participate in the made-up program that will cure his disease, giving the Perowne's the chance to overpower him. Afterwards, Henry regrets to have treated the intruder as a neurological diagnose instead of a human, to have imagined the story of Baxter's disease but not his life. Although Baxter has broken the nose of his father-in-law, put a knife to his wife's throat and almost raped his daughter, the surgeon fixes his injury and chooses not to press charges. Baxter's genetic condition is sentence enough, he decides.

On closer examination of the crucial scene in which Baxter's consciousness is transformed through Daisy's recitation of "Dover Beach," it is noteworthy that what happens to him in this experience remains a mystery to the reader. This moment, as the rest of the day, we experience from Perowne's viewpoint. Triggered by his recognition of Baxter's emotive reaction to art, Perowne comes to see him as a human being despite of his "simian" appearance (*Sat* 88)—as Kathleen Wall has pointed out: "Baxter is human, not animal!" (Wall

2008, 785).[34] For the first time, he comes to imagine Baxter's story, tries to attain an understanding of the man behind the genetic affliction. He asks himself what it would be like to stand in his shoes. Empathetically imagining the story behind his intruder, points him to the similarities between Baxter and himself—both can be touched by aesthetics; for both, the world is a dark and scary place; and Baxter lives Perowne's ultimate fear, the unraveling of consciousness.

This recognition of Baxter's humanity, however, does not really amount to a discovery of 'what the man is like inside,' as Todorov's account of empathy went: it is an attempt at understanding by *incorporating the other into the same*, by fashioning a narrative construction of his consciousness. Of course, Perowne could never succeed in seeing the world through Baxter's eyes, understanding his experience of life: probably, Baxter is not even capable of such a lucid understanding of *himself*. And due to the exclusive focalization of events through Perowne, his opponent remains a one-sided figure, a flat character, for the reader as well: we cannot *but* see him as a medical 'case,' because that is all we know of him.

Instead of an openness to Baxter's unique being, it is a recognition of sameness that awakens Perowne's compassion and inspires him to a deed of balancing the wrongs done to his attacker, to recreate a symmetry which will finally redeem Perowne, rid him of his guilt. With his operation on Baxter, described in great aesthetic detail, symmetry is arrived at on multiple levels in the novel, resolving the narrative tension as well as the different forms of guilt plaguing the protagonist: guilt for misleading Baxter with his professional power, for his high social standing, for winning the genetic lottery. This 'balancing act,' while giving the novel thematic and structural closure, allows Perowne to reinstate an ethical balance—in an exceptional achievement of harmony between form and content.

Where Perowne cannot relate to Baxter or come to a true understanding, it is the poem that intervenes, to which Baxter relates. Although Baxter is more capable of reacting to this poem than Perowne is, it becomes painfully clear that it symbolizes a community that he will

[34] Interestingly, Wall points to the similarities between Baxter's condition and that of Gregor Samsa of Kafka's "Metamorphosis", which incidentally, Daisy had made Perowne read: "has Baxter not awoken one morning to find himself utterly changed, his voice and limbs unreliable and unreal to him? Does he not find the world unfriendly toward this transformation? Does the world not simply turn its back on him like his partners in crime? Doesn't Baxter share Gregor Samsa's sense of despair at possibilities suddenly truncated and estrangement from his fellow beings?" (Wall 2008, 785) Moreover, the apotheoses of both characters are alike: Gregor asks himself "Could he be an animal if music moved him so?" (Kafka 2002, 53); Baxter is enraptured by the beauty of Arnold's "Dover Beach" and his mistaken assumption that Daisy has created it. "Baxter's response to the poem allows Perowne to recognize, as Gregor Samsa does for himself, that Baxter is human, not animal" (Wall 2008, 785).

never have access to. Despite his momentary exaltation, it only inscribes his alienation from the Perownes' universe. This starts with the experience being based on deception, on making him believe the poem to be Daisy's. Falling into this trap, his illiteracy becomes his downfall. His enchantment has the meaning of a distraction, facilitating his expulsion. Even if he does have an imagination, the uncouth man does not *belong*. As Elaine Hadley reminds us, "[t]his is decidedly not Baxter's novel—Baxters rarely, even now, have novels about them, and his confirmed case of Huntington's disease, although in its early stages, only renders him more definitively beyond the investments of the ideal of withdrawal and self-fulfillment the poem epitomizes" (Hadley 2006, 93).

The choice of "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold—"who would not have let the likes of Baxter into his front yard" (Siegel 2005, 37)—is telling in this respect. As in McEwan's take on the novel and morality, in this poem, the literary imagination plays an important thematic role. Contrasting the fleeting moment of the present with the past, "Dover Beach" clothes the past in images that prepare us for a gloomy fate, posing an immersion in the tenderness of the present moment as our only escape: with past time as our burden, the fragility of the joy of life is revealed. Between past and present, the literary imagination is installed as a gateway. It suggests that the imagination is our only way to achieve true happiness in an ignorant world—it is a sharing of the experience as outlined here with our intimates, similarly capable of imaginative understanding: "knowledge, shaped by the well-educated imagination, leads to understanding, understanding to empathy, and empathy to "true love"" in the face of the imminent threat to intricate happiness from outside (Lancashire 2009, 4).

Arnold's "ignorant armies clash[ing] by night"[35] are omnipresent as peripheral omens in *Saturday*: the anti-war marchers, the armies preparing an invasion, the ominous presence of al Qaeda, the mentally deranged and drug addicts populating the streets of London. In the face of all this chaos, what is left to rely on is secluded happiness. This message justifies Henry's resolve to refrain from opening his consciousness to the other outside his immediate circle. Such an awareness comes without guarantees, amounts to an even greater risk in already threatening times. Therefore, instead of waging the own consciousness, an inward move is

[35] Arnold's poem is printed in full as an appendix to *Saturday*; on http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display /Poem89.html, it is available with notes and commentary by Ian Lancashire.

opted for (Wallace 2007, 470). And this retreat is what literature promises here: it offers consolation and redemption.

This leads us back to McEwan's views of the novel: the 'love' that the world lacks in Arnold's poem is associated with the empathetic imagination that was juxtaposed to the terrorists' "fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred" (McEwan 2001, 16). The emphasis on love at a personal level in the absence of divine intervention is *Saturday*'s ethical answer: it is a simple, 'pure' form of ethics answering to a complex, messy, impure status quo. In a "post-millennium world [that] is baffling and dangerous, .. we are all eager for re-assurance" (Banville 2005, 9), and literature can give us this reassurance in a move away from nasty truths. Arnold's poem stages a persistent liberal humanist fantasy that has not lost its power: the fantasy of withdrawal. This celebration of the present is emphatically invoked in Perowne's operation on Baxter, when he finds himself in a state of serenity reminiscent of Kantian aesthetics, "delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future" (*Sat* 258).

If this is the world view that triumphs in *Saturday*, it does so through an evasion of the original threat posed—the spectacle of the planes—and the subsequent installment of a substitute treat that is finally overcome. As most critics have noted, *Saturday* is far more about 9/11 than we are led to believe: Baxter, "a man who believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences" (*Sat* 210), allegorically invokes the hijackers (Sharp 2006, 39), as "a kind of echo of the hatred and anger of the disenfranchised, militant, impoverished Third World" (Siegel 2005, 34).[36] Baxter's vengefulness for Perowne's prosperity and health, culminating in an attack on his family, is the equivalent of anti-Western sentiment culminating in "an attack on our whole way of living" (*Sat* 32). A relatively manageable opponent by comparison (driven by defect genes instead of beliefs), if Baxter is indeed a stand-in for this bigger threat, this only reinforces the fantasy-character of bestowing him with imaginative faculties and aesthetic sense.[37] In that case, the novel seems to carry out a

[36] Dominic Head suspects a purposeful equation between Baxter and Saddam Hussein, with an implicit "invitation to speculate on a common psychological disorder" (Head 2007, 181).

[37] In the line of critics who have not taken this gladly are Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace: "Could his point really be to suggest that, when confronted by those who hate us, the West need only resort to its wits, its encyclopedic knowledge of science, and to hold out hope of a "cure" in order to distract those who would otherwise seek to harm us? That, in the end, we will easily overpower those who invade the sanctity of our homes, and that it will then be our obligation and duty to "fix" whatever injuries they've received in the process?" (Wallace 2007, 476); and Elaine Hadley who critiques McEwan for "recapitulat[ing] liberal verities about individual subjectivity, about the ways free subjects make free ideas that then can change the world one Baxter at a time" (Hadley 2006, 100).

strategic, but grave, evasion: the concretization and personalization of a greater cultural climate of anxiety provides an opportunity for sidestepping the original ethical issues at stake. As Sontag has it,

> [a]ll modern wars … are cast as clashes of civilizations—culture wars—with each side claiming the high ground and characterizing the other as barbaric. The enemy is invariably a threat to "our way of living," an infidel, a desecrator, a polluter, a defiler of higher or better values. The current war against the very real threat posed by militant Islamic fundamentalism is a particularly clear example. Terrorism is now conflated with barbarism (Sontag 2004b, 196-97).

By redeeming Baxter with poetry, this is emphasized once more: the real, eluded other haunting this novel remains barbaric, inhuman, deprived of imagination, incapable of love. Therefore, there is no need to attempt to respond to this other. McEwan has set up a *deus ex machina* of the redemptive power of poetry to bring this point across: Baxter, unlike the 9/11 hijackers, does not lack imagination: "He isn't an Arab after all!" (Sharp 2006, 15). When evil is a lack of imagination, giving the source of evil a capability to imaginatively respond to art makes for a consolation that, in the context of 9/11, begets the character of a fantasy.

In this decision to conclude a novel that stages the ethical complexities of our contemporary world with a contrived enactment of consolation and redemption, McEwan inadvertently draws attention to the fallibility of his conception of ethics. "Stylistically", Dominic Head argues, "the novel makes a bold attempt to engage with the immediacy of human consciousness, and it is in this way that *Saturday* finally stakes a claim to a share of the ethical high ground on behalf of the literary intervention" (Head 2007, 98). But of this project, offering the reader a 'slice of mind' of a highly empowered character, the limits immediately show through. Such a novel could hardly have been written from the perspective of a Baxter or an Arab extremist. If what separates us from zealous barbarians is our ability to imagine ourselves in the position of others, it would currently be far more vital to explore the minds of these characters; but we would find out right away that this is impossible.

Where Perowne has trouble dealing with the complexity, the lack of purity and harmony of the world as compared to abstract art or science, McEwan ultimately falls into the same trap in creating a self-enclosed, perfectly balanced story out of its heterogeneous material. In his linkage of aesthetics to neurosurgery, and in his attempt to make one mind transparent, to make us live vicariously through the imagination, he comes up with a way of not having to deal with the essential opacity of otherness. His desire for symmetry goes

against singularity. Parallel to Perowne's recognition of *the same* in Baxter, of a generic humanity, we are given a character to whom we can relate for reasons of recognition: of guilt and anxiety, for instance. *Saturday* gives us what we want, as John Banville notes: it is well-received by Western readers who are reassured at a time when they are "shaken in [their] sense of themselves and their culture" (Banville 2005, 27). Ironically, a novel about the imagination's triumph over ethical complexities loses itself in fantasy.

Still, because this fantasy is incapable of answering to the 'real' anxieties informing it, something valuable is revealed about the shortcomings of McEwan's faith in love and the imagination as the consoling power of literature. These redemptive values seem an oversimplified answer to the ethical complexities of the post-9/11 world he has so subtly and intricately captured. Dissecting the brain as a metaphor for mapping psychological motivations, both linked to a pure, abstract aesthetics, does not entail a transformation of the self. Nothing of the self is gambled by the neurosurgeon, nor by the moral agent imagining what it would be like to be another. More than ever, the contemporary world demands an acknowledgement of the *opacity* of the other, the *impossibility* of fully penetrating the other's consciousness: it is no coincidence that Perowne fails in this mission when McEwan, having chosen the easiest 'other' at hand, a 'barely-other,' as his focal point, needs a structural manipulation to complete his mission.

2.5 Conclusion: Empathy as Self-Projection and the Fantasy of Redemption

McEwan's novel offers a poignant reflection of the current state of ethical anxiety, of a thoroughly ambivalent, complex global situation where politics and ethics are concerned. It also offers an insightful illustration of the fact that the extension of empathy is not as easily done as it might sound. Perowne's attempt to come to a true understanding of his opponent in the novel is described as an effort towards empathy. He almost literally asks McEwan's question in *The Guardian*, "What if it was me?". He construes a narrative of Baxter's life and fills in the gaps with his own memories and fears, only to accomplish a recognition of a general humanity. He does not "discover" what this man "is like inside," as Todorov's account of empathy went. And I have argued that such a discovery is impossible to begin with, due to the opacity of otherness. The ethical effect this act of empathy finally amounts to, is the balancing deed, a restoration of symmetry.

As far as empathy goes on a second level, for the reader, we have been invited to inhabit a 'slice' of the mind of Perowne, a rich, educated Western-European plagued by global guilt and ethical confusion—a mind probably not utterly alien to the average reader of McEwan. Due to the exclusive focalization of events through Perowne, his opponent remains a one-sided figure, a flat character: Baxter lives a sentence, is to be pitied, he is unpredictable and dangerous, but can be easily overcome due to his lack of cultural education. What is more grave, the real, eluded other haunting this novel is inscribed as *beyond* empathy, not deserving of an empathic response, as inhuman.

What does that tell us of the ethical project of empathically inhabiting the mind of another, of projecting the self in her situation in order to come to as comprehensive and full-fledged an understanding of this person, her stories and motivations? Empathic identification is filling in the gaps in your understanding of the other by projecting your*self*, your *own* memories and feelings into them. This ultimately entails an attempt at understanding based on a recognition of sameness, incorporating the other into the same, reducing the other to the self. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud has phrased it in the following way: "We shall always tend to view misery objectively, that is to project ourselves, with all our demands and susceptibilities, into their conditions, and then try to determine what occasions for happiness or unhappiness we should find in them" (Freud 2001,130). This mode of perception is blind to variation in subjective sensitivity, and "substitutes our own mental state for all others, of which we know nothing" (*Ibid*.131). Similarly, when we transfer feelings of empathy from an aesthetic object to an actual human and ask 'what if it was me?', the self remains firmly placed in the center of its consciousness. We cannot 'map' the psyche of the other. The desire to achieve this, is the utopia of "giv[ing] everything you have to others, but los[ing] nothing of yourself" (*Sat* 171): it revolves around control, appropriation.

In *Saturday*, consolation and redemption are present as driving desires at different levels. Symmetry is arrived at thematically as well as structurally, resolving the narrative tension. The *deus ex machina* of the redemptive power of poetry functions as a balancing plot element, while at the same time warranting an ethical solution to the threat imposed by the other—on both the narrative and stylistic level, perfect closure is arrived at. McEwan has written a highly harmonious novel. The poem that comes to the protagonist's rescue functions as a symbol of the liberal fantasy of secluded happiness. Literature promises a safe retreat, consolation and redemption: pure and reassuring in the face of the messy state of the world.

The novel ends on a note of Kantian serenity at a remove from anxiety: the driving fantasy is transcendent, entails a move away from life. *Saturday* gives its readers what they want, lets them indulge in this fantasy. As Murdoch has warned us, "[t]he temptation of art, a temptation to which every work of art yields except the greatest ones, is to console" (Murdoch 1961, 292). And to fall prey to the temptation to flee from a less-than-perfect world makes imagination into fantasy:

> the love which is not art inhabits the world of practice, the world which is haunted by that incompleteness and lack of form, which is abhorred by art, and where action cannot always be accompanied by radiant understanding, or by significant and consoling emotions. In the particular world there may be only mourning and the final acceptance of the incomplete. (Murdoch 1959, 220)

Saturday's self-contained character makes it into a work of consolation, a meticulously crafted work of fiction that defies the imperfections of life. Ultimately, formal and structural unity is chosen over the contingency, risk and chance so truthfully depicted in the world of the novel. *Saturday* highlights rather than conceals the contemporary problem of ethics.

Chapter 3: *What* Literature? From Realist Narrative Fiction to Literary Friction, or Entangled Artfulness and Textfulness

Here I perform a critical assessment of the concept of the literary text that emanates from the theories of ethical criticism discussed in the previous chapter. I argue that the category of 'literature' implied here is both too exclusive—in its restriction of literature to realist texts, ruling out a whole body of literature from having ethical effects—and not exclusive enough—in its categorical identification of literature with narrative fiction, insufficiently accountable for the specificity of literature as an art form. I argue for an attention to the stylistic features of literature, and offer a short overview of different ways of 'thinking style and content' in literary theory. With Susan Sontag, it is shown how style, or form, and content cannot be separated, they have to be thought together. A final section deals with style in relation to meaning, and with the friction inherent in the materials of literature as art and text, singular and general. This friction, shown to be a returning element in diverse accounts of thinking about literature—it is here traced in the work of Sartre, Kant, Attridge, Derrida, Barthes, Adorno and Sontag. It is this tension that, as chapter 4 will show from an experiential point of view, allows for a distinctly literary experience or mode of reading..

3.1 Against Literature as a Playground of Ethics

In the previous chapter I have critiqued some of the prevalent views on the ethical effects of reading literary novels on the ground of their reliance on empathy as the ethical potential of the literary novel. Here, I need to readdress these scholars one more time, in order to dwell upon a different aspect of their theories: the concept of the literary text that emanates from them.

As mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, these theories associated with ethical criticism center around the conviction that the ethical power of literature is located in the way we attempt to become familiar with the ideas, feelings and viewpoints of characters. Literature, the argument goes, lets us vicariously experience things we would never experience in reality, encounter people we would normally never meet. Thus we are enabled to reflect upon complex moral situations, expanding our capacities of ethical judgment in real

life through a comprehension of the uniqueness of every perspective. In this respect, they argue, the novel is like a friend.

Let there be no misunderstanding: surely I endorse the idea that ethical dilemmas are more vividly represented in works of imaginative literature than in ethical treatises. Moreover, it is liable that certain truths are better apprehended when made *felt*, than when *reported*; the narrative form and a human perspective are definitely apt to serve the transmission of ethical insights. I am mostly concerned here, as said, with the idea of literature underlying, and expressed by, these theories. I will argue that this category of 'literature' implied by them is both *too* exclusive (paradoxically, since it departs from a belief in literature's universal significance), and not exclusive *enough*. It is too narrow in that it rules out a vast body of literature from having ethical effects; it is too broad in that it insufficiently accounts for the specificity of literature as an art form. Whereas works of literature might even help us approach and understand others in a more inclusive and empathic way, this is just one of their many possible functions and dimensions. Far from denying the possibility that narrative fiction can cause these ethical effects in its readers, then, it needs to be said that 'literature' and 'narrative fiction' are not interchangeable categories. Literature is not only, in many cases, narrative: it is also art, which complicates matters.

The concept of 'literature' that can be extracted from these views is centered around the complex psychology and the 'realism' of characters whom we should judge at least somewhat sympathetic, and who are assumed to notably develop throughout the work (Hakemulder 1998, 295). This is required because psychological development makes our identifying with characters more worthwhile: Hakemulder's empirical research is suggestive in this respect. And Gregory Currie carefully suggests that the higher the level of realism of a literary text, especially concerning the psychology of characters, the more valuable the experience (Currie 1998, 173). Vera Nünning shares his preference for "life-like" characters (Nünning 2008, 371), explaining that "It is certainly easier to feel sympathy for or antipathy against a character which is not put at one remove by means of a plethora of defamiliarizing devices" (*Ibid*.371)—to which I agree, that is a whole lot easier. This condition that literature has to meet for moral effects to occur, however, puts some restrictions to the scope of theories envisaging matters so. This partiality is reflected when we look at the level of realism of the examples employed: Nussbaum illustrates her argument with novels from the social-realist genre like Dickens' *Hard Times*, whereas the texts selected for Hakemulder's reader research

all describe actions we could perform and persons or groups we could encounter in reality, and the research itself focuses on these 'realistic' contents.

The obscurity of the argument emerges when critics persist in identifying the specific conventions of 'literary realism,' what might be roughly seen as the major nineteenth-century novelistic tradition, as those of literary prose as a whole. This seemingly peripheral aspect gains in weight when we realize that the genre is, more than just a set of conventions, characterized by a specific outlook on the nature of literature and its reflection of reality. The creation of a fictional reality during this period is linked to a conception of the novel as a verbal reproduction of external social phenomena. Drawing upon a metaphor by Emile Zola, the novel is envisioned less as a somewhat hazy mirror held up to reality, enhancing its colors (as in Romanticism), than as a plain, ultra-thin window glass with the pretence of full transparency, the underlying images emerging in all their reality: "The realist screen denies its own existence" (Den Boeft 1994, 170).[38] Within its design literary language becomes self-effacing in the course of communicating a reality that is always both accessible and recognizable for the writer-as-observer. The language of realist prose therefore functions primarily as a recorder focused on an external social reality. Consequently, the restrictions of realistic narrative correspond to those of reality. The transparency of the narrating instance and the condition of a 'styleless style' are inspired by the claim to objectivity of analytic science (*Ibid*.161-62).[39]

Besides being founded on this somewhat anachronistic outlook on literature and its mediation of reality, a conceptualization of literature that equates literature with realist narrative fiction is bound to exclude a number of texts which I would not dare to call non-literary: what to gain with respect to an understanding of the human motivation by reading Beckett? Furthermore, in order to identify or empathize, Hakemulder notes that we should judge a character at least a bit sympathetic to begin with (Hakemulder 1998, 245). This would

[38] Emile Zola, "Brief aan A. Anthony Valabrègue", cited in Den Boeft 1994, 170. Translation mine.

[39] This of course has everything to do with the fact that historically-oriented social-realist narrative emerged in the heyday of the paradigm of 'objective' historiography and a general social need to present reality in all its authenticity. Reality was expected to stand for itself, without the need to subject it to a 'function' or 'structure': the mere fact that it happened legitimizes the discourse. It was a *Zeitgeist* of 'reality for reality's sake,' and in this sense the opposite of Antiquity with its epideictic genre. Literary realism prefers actuality over probability; Roland Barthes defines it as "every discourse which accepts "speech-acts" justified by their referent alone" (Barthes 1982, 15). The danger that this entails in our conception of the link between literature and reality, as Barthes sees it, is that art could trap us into an illusion of the real, which keeps us from taking a critical stance. The 'problem' with historical writing from a contemporary point of view is its claim to an unproblematic link to truth which is in fact nothing but the working of textual devices (*Ibid*.15-6).

make a reading of many a Dostoyevsky novel uninteresting from a moral perspective, which certainly cannot be the case. Authors like Borges are known to completely undermine realist claims to historical objectivity, whereas Woolf's *The Waves* can hardly be said to deal with rounded-off characters in the traditional sense. Even when identification belongs to the possibilities of reception, it would not always be unequivocally desirable that we project our alleged empathy with a character onto real life. For instance, what to think of Nabokov's Humbert Humbert and pedophiles as a marginal group?

In this line of thought our feelings for literary characters are un-problematically transmitted to our ethical feelings, attitudes and actions in reality. The focal point of the experiences is thought to be the literary character, with whom we empathize or indentify (Nussbaum, Todorov), whose lives we "try out" (Booth) or whose experiences we simulate or "empathically reenact" (Currie). What has been scarcely reflected upon is the issue of *transference*: whether empathy for fictional characters will actually translate into ethical attitudes towards the real people supposedly represented by them. I think this cannot be uncritically assumed. This straightforward move from the literary to the ethical is problematic: characters are taken to have a psyche as real people do, and literary situations are deemed to be as complex as real ones—whereas truly, they are 'merely' textual, hence of an altogether different complexity, or, to speak with Henry James in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, a "compositional resource" (*The Golden* 2).[40] The tendency to put literature on a par with the genre of realism is astutely identified and critiqued by Susan Sontag:

> [T]he decision of the old novelists to depict the unfolding of the destinies of sharply individualized "characters" in familiar, socially dense situations within the conventional notation of chronological sequence is only one of the many possible decisions, possessing no inherently superior claim to the allegiance of serious readers. There is nothing innately more "human" about these procedures. The presence of realistic characters is not, in itself, something wholesome, a more nourishing staple for the moral sensibility. (Sontag 1967b 42-3)

[40] In their strong focus on characters in texts, ethical critics betray the influence of the *Poetics* of Aristotle, who took literature to revolve around the plot, which was driven by character, which is in turn revealed through action (Cf. Artistoteles 2004, XIII-XVIII). That was all very well for the classical tragedy, but it is a fairly poor characterization to persist in when applied to the full range and scope of the literary arts in this day. Sontag points out that the occurrence of representations of humans in literature can serve multiple goals, which do not always include dramatic tension, vividness or a three-dimensionality of (inter-)personal relationships—this, then, should by no means be elevate to a generic standard. Instead, a writer could aim at exploring ideas, something inanimate, or the natural world; all at the cost of the realism of her characters or a downgrading of the 'human scale' (Sontag 1967b, 42).

If we would undergo a novel exactly as if it concerned real people we met, real situations we found ourselves in, we would not approach it *as an artistic medium* at all. Not only would such an approach to literature be severely restricting, it would even lead to degrading the work, as we then take from it only what we know to exist, which is generally the least interesting part—the world as we know it, *already* exists. "Art has the power to make us perceive the world differently, in a richer way: if we abstract from it its semblances to reality, we diminish this power" (Sontag 1964, 12), as Sontag warns us elsewhere.

As mentioned before, besides employing this restricted underlying notion of literature as equated with literary realism, at the same time these theories of literature and ethics are not exclusive enough in their scope: all that is claimed about literature is also applicable more broadly to 'narrative' and 'fiction' or 'narrative fiction'. In this respect, the fact that Noël Carroll derives his examples for his argument—that narrative artworks activate pre-existing moral emotions in their readers, thus expanding their audience's capacities of identifying abstract virtues and vices—from genre fiction, is indicative (See, for instance, Carroll 2006, 15).

The category of fiction, however, is not identical with that of literature, and this is important to realize and for studies of these respective concepts to reflect upon. For one thing, there is a quantitative distinction when it comes to their extensions: whereas fiction is a "large subclass of all invented stories, which can be realized in any number of media", literature is a significantly smaller subcategory of linguistic expressions (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 225). Then, there is a qualitative difference in signification: whereas 'fiction' is a descriptive term, 'literature' is used evaluative (*Ibid*.225)—according to Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, it implies that the work intends to present something of general human interest, whereas the fictive stance is in no need of such an implication (*Ibid*.276)— this, however, seems far too vague and problematic a distinction.

More to the mark, I would argue, is Attridge asserting that literature and fiction refer to different *modes* of reading, in some cases pertinent to one and the same object. In a work of fiction, the audience is presented with fictional characters and situations for their entertainment, nothing more. As Attridge describes the conceptual distinction of *literary* fiction, it "involves the performance of fictionality, occurring as the experience of an event or a series of events whereby the characters and occurrences apparently being referred to are in fact, and without this fact being disguised, *brought into being by the language*" (Attridge

2004b, 96, emphasis mine). By the same logic, narrative is 'literary' when it involves the performance of narrativity.[41] An attention to the ways in which literary language brings narrativity and fictionality into being in an artful way is thus necessary for any attempt to account for what literary texts can and cannot *do*—a question to which I will return at length in the next paragraph.[42]

When we put literature on one level with narrative fiction, this does not do justice to the complexities of both the literary text and its readers. When seen as an art form that performs and stages fictionality and narrativity through the style and form of language instead, one of its most important characteristics comes to the fore, namely ambiguity. Literary texts tend to have an evasive, indeterminate quality, brought about by literary tropes or devices, which obstruct straightforward understanding instead of promoting it. Most of the time, literary texts do not provide clear-cut answers, and we are led in multiple directions at once—if anything, they pose more questions.

Consequently, the focus on *judging* in Palmer's, Nussbaum's and Carroll's work seems a bit misplaced. By making the ethical judgment of situations and characters part of our experience of literature, ethical critics sidestep the aesthetic experience. Carroll, too, holds that "reading narrative literature typically involves us in a *continuous process* of making moral judgements" (Carroll 1998, 230; emphasis mine). Art makes something singular explicit, whereas judgment necessarily entails generalization, ranging the singular under an overarching category. Therefore, whereas a work of art can be judged *as art*, the aesthetic experience transcends judgment (Sontag 1965b, 29). The literary work is an act of 'showing' and 'telling,' an experience that enables us to postpone our everyday habits of judgment, of labeling persons and acts as 'good' or 'bad'. And more importantly, often a text or narrative instance does not supply us with guidelines with respect to the 'right' ethical response or fitting moral attitude (as Palmer argues) to characters and situations. On the contrary,

[41] As with the narrative and fictional mode of reading, the presence of neither description nor metaphor is enough to make a text literary, for these occur in a vast range of other media as well; only when responding literarily to a work that demands this of us, we take pleasure in them for "showing simultaneously what they are and what they can do" (Attridge 2004, 96).

[42] Neither Nussbaum nor Booth would deny that an attention to form and style is essential to every reading of a literary text; both contend, in fact, that these elements are essentially inseparable from their ethical dimensions: "Once we expand the notion of the ethical to include all of the characters of the implied creator, and all of our relationship to him or her, we find that all of our aesthetic judgments – of the beauty of the work, of the sheer joy of that living with it produces – are inescapably tied to ethics" (Booth 1988, 377-79; Cf. Nussbaum 1995, 5). However, these remarks seem to serve as little more than disclaimers, for neither has put them into practice in their own readings. For a more elaborate critique on the insufficient attention paid by both scholars to issues of form and aesthetics, Cf. Lamarque and Olsen 1994).

ambiguity works against the simple classifications of the 'approval or disapproval,' 'blame or commendation' sort. When we do take ambiguity into account, the overtly celebratory idea(l) of literature as a 'ethical playground,' as embraced by the scholars discussed here, should be somewhat tempered: it renders our reactions considerably more unpredictable, which points to the possibility that the outcome is not necessarily all that beneficial.[43] For one thing, as Richard Posner reminds us, a reader could easily identify or empathize with the 'wrong' kinds of character, with less-than-wholesome consequences (Posner 1997, 20; Cf. Locatelli 2008, 29-30).

Moreover, whereas the scholars mentioned have considerable faith in the way readers see characters as 'friends,' as real people they meet "with the important difference that we can discover right away what they are like inside" (Todorov 2007, 27), this covers a fairly simple concept of 'the individual' which is possibly challenged by literature (Culler 2007, 32-3). Therefore I would rather subscribe to Attridge's metaphor of the literary work as a stranger that never becomes totally familiar (Attridge 1999, 26). Instead of training us to judge, providing us with case studies for applying the fitting abstract label to a concrete narrative example, I take literary texts as teaching us how to suspend our judgments. Through form and style, literature presents us with paradoxical, ambiguous, opaque truths which are never exhausted by interpretation (Murdoch 1965, 91).

3.2 Art as Statement: the Primacy of Content over Style

Literature is often considered as a vehicle for conveying interesting human affair (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 276). This incited the protagonist of *Saturday* to clumsily take the literary texts that his daughter made him read as imparting knowledge: from *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, for instance, he has learned "that adultery is understandable but wrong, that 19th-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so" (*Sat* 67). Literary works, to put it very simply, *mean*, because of their use of language. Through the referential properties of the text we are confronted with concepts, feelings and characters from which we can derive knowledge. The literary text always works in many ways simultaneously; it can have many different effects at once: it can provide information and teach us about new attitudes and points of view, and in

[43] For a more elaborate discussion of this point that is specifically focused on the social realist novel and its ability to substantiate prejudice, see Maxwell 2006.

this respect they are indeed one discourse among many others. Responding to the work as literary, however, is *not* extrapolating conceptual matter from it for practical or recreational ends. When read for information and used for extra-artistic goals, of which an improvement of social cohesion is yet one example, literary works are treated as *statements*. This is what is meant with instrumentalism, approaching a literary text as a means to a predetermined end; Attridge describes it as "coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness" (Attridge 2004b, 7). When we take the ethical value of texts to lie in the pleasure they bring us by allowing us to judge acts and characters as if they were real, this could be seen as an instrumentalist approach.

Oppositely, in literary theory, an important body of work is devoted to the belief that literary texts are characterized by their stylistic features. This extensive tradition runs from Horace, and Quintilian, through the British Romantic writers, to the Russian Formalists and the Prague Linguistic Circle (Miall and Kuiken 1994b, 1). Still, in most periods of literary criticism, the stress has fallen on meaning and content, with the tendency to understand the literary text as transmitting a message as inescapable consequence. Under the yoke of instrumental readings, art is treated as a commentary to its historical, cultural or social context. But the text is not a static object transcending culture and time, fixed and predetermined, awaiting our scrutiny: it is an *experience*. The instrumentalist approach departs from the point *after* the actual reading experience, on which it does not reflect. What gives literature its culture-critical potency in society, is precisely its high density of meaning or 'content,' both in the informative and the ethical sense, perforce of its linguistic nature. This has led to the complaints by the pro-aesthetics camp reflected in the first chapter of this thesis, and it informed Sontag to protest about critics who primarily use literary texts as "pretexts .. for social and cultural diagnosis" (Sontag 1965a, 298).

A prominent example of such a view of prose literature as instrumental, as a vehicle of communicating political and societal messages, is that expounded in Jean-Paul Sartre's "What is Literature?" Here, he overtly identifies the literary text by its alleged 'message,' posing the rhetorical question "[a]re we not in the habit of putting this basic question to young people who are thinking of writing: "Do you have anything to say?" Which means: something which is worth the trouble of being communicated" (Sartre 1998, 36). Granting prose literature only this communicative function and aim, Sartre denies it its status as an art form. He juxtaposes

it to 'poetry,' meant to envelop practically all nonrepresentational art, to which he assigns the opposite aim of expressing the ineffable. This rigid distinction is made to serve the agenda of his essay: promoting the political engagement of literary authors. For Sartre, writing equals speaking, which in turn equals acting; acting unveils a status quo in order to change it. Here, writing is conceptualized very pragmatically, as a form of acting in the world, as bringing forth certain effects for which the author must take her responsibility—the obligation Sartre bestows her with, is to make known that human beings are at liberty to reinvent themselves every day (*Ibid*.235). The belief in literature as instrument to this end has seldom been stated as bluntly. Style serves a minor role in this mission of literary commitment: although it does add to the value of prose, it is seen as a mere embellishment that should not attract too much attention, must not divert the reader from the content. Very much like Zola wrote about realist literature, Sartre metaphorically describes literary language as transparent and therefore renounces stylistic intervention: "since the gaze looks through [the words], it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass" (*Ibid*.39).

In her much-anthologized essays "Against Interpretation" and "On Style", Susan Sontag has reflected upon the somewhat subsidiary status of the stylistic features of the literary text in criticism; here, she has fiercely critiqued the rigid conceptual separation of the form of the art work from its content, and the primacy of the latter over the first. Sontag traces the tendency to gloss over the formal dimension of the literary arts back to Plato's introduction of mimetic theory (Sontag 1964, 3). This recognition is akin to Walter Benjamin's in his influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility", in which he points to a fundamental reallocation of the focal point of art between archaic tribal societies, who focused on its experiential meaning, to the first theoretical accounts of that experience, introduced to the West by Plato and Aristotle.[44] Both believe the primary experience of art to be, to some extent, lost to the abstracting theoretical impulse. As a result, art is evaluated almost entirely in terms of its ethical and political functions. Whereas Aristotle makes an effort to revitalize the aesthetic experience, its value is still understood in ulterior terms.

Sontag sees the ambivalence toward style as informed by a cultural interest in protecting values—most importantly truth and morality—traditionally considered external to, but allegedly at hazard of being compromised by, art (Sontag 1965b, 24). From that particular

[44] Sontag has devoted an essay to the life and work of Benjamin, titled "Under the Sign of Saturn"—Cf. Sontag 1975.

moment on, art has been in need of some form of defense. As a solution to art's problematic status we have conceptually detached its form, deemed accessory, from its content, its essence, and here originates the idea that art has a message or statement to communicate (Sontag 1964, 4).[45] Through this opposition, the formal properties of a text are held at a safe distance from the work's relationships to ethics, history, and society. The notion of the primacy of art's content was never totally abandoned afterwards; it retains the tightest grip on our approach to literature, rooted as it is in the never-ending project of interpretation which, as Sontag sees it, is often characterized by an "overt contempt for appearances" (*Ibid*.6). She specifically opposes hermeneutic interpretation of the structuralist sort (to be discerned in psychoanalytical and Marxist schools) that determine or fix the sensuous surface of art by 'explaining' it in terms of its non-aesthetic deeper structures.

The only way to silence this incessant digging for deeper meanings is an upheaval of our deeply ingrained understanding of form and content as separated, for this separation is an illusion (*Ibid*.12). However, the distinction is particularly hard to shake off in the practice of criticism since it works in the service of warranting the primacy of the ethical, the political, and the ideological. The notion that the work 'has' a style is a solution to this problem (*Ibid*.19).

When literary criticism does remark upon the style of the work, it all too often employs a scheme wherein sound functions to reflect sense and form to reproduce meaning. Prevalence of these antitheses, Attridge warns us, leads to form being continuously handled as "something of an embarrassment to be encountered, and if possible evaded, on the way to a consideration of semantic, and thus historical, political, and ideological, concerns" (Attridge 2004b, 107-08). This erroneous distinction of course stems from the belief that style is an added quality to beautify the pre-existing work—obviously a fallacy, since a neutral, absolutely transparent style is impossible to attain, *pace* the doxa of literary realism and its efforts toward objectivity and 'stylelesness'. Art is always artificial: style is not a matter of density or quantity, it is not *added* to the work (Sontag 1965b, 17)—no more than content being something the work 'contains' in a certain quantity.

[45] The relation between style and form is somewhat complex, since they overlap in many ways. Sontag uses the terms interchangeably. Nevertheless, she defines 'style' as "the particular idiom in which [the artist] deploys the *forms* of his art (Sontag 1965b, 34). The formal dimension of the text can be seen as comprising all generic, narrative and stylistic elements. 'Form' is usually employed to describe rather roughly the characteristics which subsume a text to under a certain category, whereas style is taken to be more ungraspable, more personally belonging to the author.

3.3 Deconstructing the Form/Content Binary

To counter-act instrumentalism of literature in all its guises, we need a more inclusive and an altogether more specifically and uniquely 'artistic' conception of literary texts. I think such a conception is to be gained when we shift our focus from the assumed typically literary characteristics of the *content* of texts to their *style*; in other words, a focus on the how of the what (and manifested tensions between the two), instead of an exclusive consideration of the what. Then it becomes clear that art can never make a statement, has nothing 'to say': a work of art encountered *as a work of art* is an experience, not an answer to a question or a solution to a problem. Dealt with as art, the pleasure derived of the literary experience can be conceptualized, as will be done, as an experience of a certain *form* of knowing, rather than conveying conceptual knowledge: literary works become "knowledge as non-conceptual objects" (Adorno 1977, 193).[46] Of course, in the case of literature, it would be nonsensical to neglect its 'human' content, since meaning and style are completely interwoven in the fabric of the text.

'Form' is a term usually roughly employed to designate the characteristics which subsume a text to under a certain category of school, tradition or period. Style is taken here to be more ungraspable, more personally belonging to the author, comes in an indefinite number of different guises: a style is "the particular idiom in which [the artist] deploys the *forms* of his art (Sontag 1965b, 34). Style is the guiding principle for the choices an author makes, and the outcome of an epistemological decision: a determination of what we do, and do not see: "[e]very style is a means of insisting on something" (*Ibid*.35). Literary form is traditionally linked to a fixed, static idea of the text, by which its meaning or content stands in sharp contrast to its materiality. And indeed, as Attridge points out, in spite of Plato's and Aristotle's influence in the aesthetic tradition, literary theory associates form with matter or substance: a focus on the phonic or graphic material of a poem, for instance, amounts to formalism (Attridge 2004b, 107-08). On the other hand, form is aligned to generality and transcendence, juxtaposed to content or meaning, which is deemed specific. Critics with a knack for politics or historical veracity mistrust it for precisely this reason, its alleged

[46] This may still sound a bit vague and mysterious, but the idea of the literary experience being characterized by its form will be elucidated in the next chapter, focused on the effects of defamiliarizing texts on the readers' habits of thinking and feeling.

character of a "serene abstraction from the give-and-take of contingent, meaning-charged reality" (*Ibid*.114).

In order to think past the false binary form/content, to bring to an end this conceptualization of art as a statement and its correlated subordination to values of truth and morality, Sontag deconstructs the traditional conception of matter as 'inside' and style as 'outside' by turning it inside-out: "The matter, the subject is on the outside, the style is on the inside … The mask is the face" (Sontag 1965b, 18). With this reversal, she reveals the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, who asserted in his *Geburt der Tragödie* that whereas the story is necessary to draw the attention of the public, and possibilities of identification entice them even further, in the end it only distracts from what tragedy really is about, the "Urschmerz": a state of perpetual suffering from our existence as individuals (Nietzsche 1994, 130-31). Although necessary to render a tragedy intelligible, Nietzsche values plot and narrative, identification and empathy as secondary; on the subject of fear and pity, and the celebration of the noble character of the hero, he asserts: "so gewiss ich glaube, dass für zahlreiche Menschen gerade das und nur das die Wirkung der Tragödie ist, so deutlich ergibt sich daraus, dass sie diese alle, samt ihren interpretierenden Ästhetikern, von der Tragödie als einen höchsten *Kunst* nichts erfahren haben" (*Ibid*.225). This characterization as "höchsten Kunst" he ascribes to tragedy, is in fact warranted by its style: the music of the tragedy is on the inside, forms its core.

Subject matter as Sontag and Nietzsche wish to understand it, then, can even be understood as fulfilling a *formal* function: we might say that 'content' or meaning functions as bait, luring consciousness into an engagement in formal processes of transformation.[47] Note that neither Sontag nor Nietzsche deny that art has meaning, contains information and presents situations we can judge morally and intellectually: they both assert us nonetheless, that in the aesthetic experience, these elements are of secondary significance. Thus approached, art can no longer be regarded as a statement. And rather than style being merely accessory to content, what idea we have of content derives from the general style of thought that prevails in a particular historical culture. To understand this, Sontag writes, we first need to understand our style of thinking of content as subject matter: "content has to be put in its

[47] This enables us to appreciate works of art which, regarded in terms of 'content,' we find morally objectionable, without scruples. A famous example is Sontag's praising of the aesthetics of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, which, according to Sontag, disrupts and overturns its ideological content: content plays a formal role (Sontag 1965b, 26). Later she has modified and moderated this claim.

place" (Sontag 1965b, 20). Before we can do this, a new concept of form is required: one that does not fall into these traditionally ingrained oppositions. Style and form suspend instrumentalism, obstruct the interpretative drive that divorces form from content, to ascribe to the latter ethical and political expressiveness: in Attridge's words, literature is distinguished by a "form without formalism" (Attridge 2004b, 119). Style can frustrate communication and interpretation, counteract unequivocal signification or, to revisit Sartre's metaphor, obscure the spectator's gaze through language's window by deliberately slipping in some particularly tainted pieces of glass, which disfigure and transform our outlook on the world.

The importance of form in the ethical transformation of consciousness is a central point in the philosophy of Theodor Adorno. In his response to Sartre he radically opposes himself to the latter's take on engagement—though not completely, for he explicitly departs from the aesthete's position of art's transcendence (Adorno 1977, 189-90). For Adorno, the powers of social transformation inherent in committed art, allowing it to "work at the level of fundamental attitudes" (*Ibid*.181), reside in its formal characteristics. Adorno condemns authors like Sartre and Brecht for 'naively' writing *about* chaos, absurdity and abuse, as if its discussion in art alone could function as a catalyst for social transformation simply by making it a topic. In a traditional literary representation with a perfectly finalized unity of beginning, middle and end, the status quo is maintained, which gives the experience that it 'treats' an illusory coherence and thus escapes its true misshapenness. Thus, literature gives life back its meaning, and it can easily be appropriated for goals of diversion or escapism, even if those are the very goals that art seeks to attack. This art has a consoling, redeeming character.

The experience of disintegration which characterizes modern life for Adorno could only be represented negatively, in the *form*: in an aesthetic form capable of conveying the scars inflicted by the crisis of the subject, to express its powerlessness. This "renders the content to which the artist commits himself inherently ambiguous" (*Ibid*.180). It is not literature's business to imagine alternative societies: it should "resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads" (*Ibid*.180). For Adorno, this is what constitutes the true relation of art to reality: the elements of which reality consists are regrouped by art's formal laws. Sartre's idea of art as expressing a political 'message' or statement could never succeed in truly transforming consciousness, for it is already accommodated in the world it critiques: "the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be rescued from deception by refusing it"

(*Ibid*.193). This rootedness of all art in culture is arguably at its strongest in literature, due to its linguistic materials.

3.4 Artfulness and Textfulness: Literary Style in Relation to Meaning

Literature's status as art *and* language makes for an interesting friction between two realms that, to some extent, usually exclude each other: the materiality of the medium and the singularity of the object, between the (impossible) desire to transcendence and the inescapability of reference. This has been picked up by diverse literary theorists.

Form is often associated with universality, transcendence, purity and meaninglessness. As traditionally conceived it is supposed to be apprehended immediately—in the literal sense of 'without mediation': transparent, pure, abstract and generalizable. Literature, on the other hand, is punctuated with concepts and ideas, hardly separable from its material dimension. Sartre bestows literature with the greatest potentiality for engagement because of its highly conceptual character: "The writer deals with meanings" (Sartre 1988, 28). This amounts to a special case: herein, in artfulness conjoined with textfulness, lies the unique character of literature. If we want to conceive of a more organic notion of style and content, this has to be taken into consideration. Again, some confusion can be taken away by revising the Kantian experience of pure beauty.

For Kant, the judgment of 'true' or free—as opposed to dependent—beauty is an immediate, unmediated one, since the feeling of delight we experience *is* the agreement between imagination and understanding, the creation of a representation in our minds of a sensuous object which is undetermined by any concept. Iris Murdoch has expressed her doubt on the matter of the 'conceptless' nature of art. Kant's definition of 'pure' judgments, she argues, is far too narrow:

> [w]e would not want to share Kant's ideal of the work of art as being if possible, and somehow striving to be, non-significant. The idea that it is in some sense an end in itself need not entail *that*; and we can speak of the work of art as having its own unique self-containing form, being indeed a quasi-object, and having no educational purpose, while at the same time allowing it to *use* concepts, or even *be* a thing with other purposes. (Murdoch 1959, 210)

The polemics between advocates and adversaries of ethical criticism, or between moralists and aestheticists to name another example, demonstrate that the extent to which art may be

influenced by (ethical) concepts is indeed a matter of dispute. Can a house be an art object, and if so, can it be useful as a building at the same time? The question if what is said in a novel, its meaning or the messages it contains, weighs in our judgment of it *as literature*, is of the same order. In these cases, separating aesthetic judgment from other types of judgment, or keeping the judgment pure, proves a complicated issue in practice. Murdoch does not see a contradiction in the notion of art being independent and 'for itself,' while at the same time involving and expressing concepts. Taken into account, this allows for a relaxation of Kant's strict separation of art from concepts and purposes; this points of refinement should lessen the rigidity of Kant's theory to stretch it far enough to incorporate literature.

But how does literature relate to these concepts it employs, to its origin in social convention? Literary texts are made up of the materials of a particular social life-world: all kinds of different contextual materials are assembled and interwoven into a unique formal event, bringing something new in the world. This explains Adorno's conviction that social oppositions are made manifest in the literary form: since connections or mediations between form and meaning are based on conventions, the form of literature is always connected to the society it stems from. Every product of the literary imagination, however antagonistically expressive, must first emerge from the very materials of the reality it seeks to transcend.

The *context* of each work is thus always present in its material, its language, and the same goes for the culturally constituted reader, whose context is present in her response to it. What is more, the singularity of literature as theorized by Derrida is completely comprised by functions of the 'contextual' sort. It is an assemblage of rudiments from its environment of origin, by which both reader and text are ultimately constructed. (Attridge 2004, 114). These formal elements that words consist of are nuclei of signification, embedded as they are in history and culture. Now it becomes clear how form, or style, and meaning are components of one and the same event, indissoluble by literature's nature: the meaning is already there, adopted in the form. In their material dimension, their shapes and sounds, words *already* signify: it is impossible to distill from the text a purely formal property, form or style by itself has no ground to exist. The resultant configuration of culturally-rooted materials becomes a new form, which is just as much a new content or, as Attridge calls it, an "open set of fresh possibilities of meaning, feeling, perceiving, responding, behaving" (Attridge 2004b, 108). Although these cultural materials initially facilitate the conception of the work, they are

reconfigured, reassembled in such a way as to bring something new into the world, something that exceeds the sum of those materials.

The ambiguity of literature as an art form arises in an important measure from the dual character of its material, language. On the one hand, this language is conceived in an encounter between the author and a certain society, in a certain time, and is in that sense very limited. From this limited social space, however, "it refers the writer back, by a sort of tragic reversal, to the sources, that is to say, the instruments of creation" (Barthes 1953, 36). The writer's simultaneous choice of, and responsibility for, a mode of writing constitutes a tension between freedom and rootedness in history. Language carries the traces of all previous utterances and changes continuously: freedom thus consists only at the level of initial choice. For Barthes, these historical link roots of signification render the literary representation "immediately ideological" (Barthes 1973, 410).

Sontag sees this tension as a conflict between the material character of literature and the 'spirit,' a form of consciousness it wants to embody. In "The Aesthetics of Silence" she describes the different ways in which literature itself can embody formally a resistance to theory and interpretation as a gesturing towards silence. The concreteness of the materials of art, she notes, are inescapably limiting. This remark is generally true for all art, but begets a particular aptness when we consider the literary text: "[p]racticed in a world furnished with second-hand perceptions, and specifically confounded by the treachery of words, the artist's activity is cursed with mediacy" (Sontag 1967a, 5). The writer struggles with these materials whose sheer materiality resist the transcendence she sometimes desires to realize: a desire never to be fulfilled. This is so because of the nature of language, which is simultaneously 'immaterial' (when compared to images) and tending towards transcendence, consisting of abstractions beyond the singular, *and* "the most impure, the most contaminated, the most exhausted of all the materials out of which art is made" (*Ibid.*14). Sontag hints to a sense of corruption we experience in language, afflicted as it is by its cumulative uses in history. Due to this peculiarity of its material, literature unites, and has to come to terms with, two possibly hostile realms of signification and their mutual relation: the 'meaning' that the writer endeavors to phrase, and this conventional assemblage of systematized, worn-down meanings that envelops her own expression and impedes, endangers, and infects it (*Ibid.*15).

This tension has conceivably been best explained by Derrida, who has stressed the dual character of each literary act as concurrently singular and general. Singularity is

inevitably divided, can never be absolute. It partakes in the referential nature of language, so it necessarily general: without this generality it would be unreadable, inaccessible and meaningless. Singularity and generality are interdependent (Attridge 1992, 15). By force of this duality, the singularity of literature is iterable, depends on an openness to new contexts: it is limitlessly repeatable, without the experience ever being exactly the same. This can never be reduced by theoretical reflection of literary criticism. Iterability, moreover, allows for a conceptualization of the literary text as temporal and dynamic.

Now we have seen how literary texts are bounded *and* free, autonomous and heteronymous at the same time in relation to the societies they originated in, and how they relate to the second-hand character of their linguistic and cultural material to go beyond it, what is left to remark upon is how literary style affects reference. For literary form, or style, *does* something to the materials that make up the work: form trans-forms the concepts and meaning it employs, and that originated in this society: "If no word which enters a literary work ever wholly frees itself from its meaning in ordinary speech, so no literary work, not even the traditional novel, leaves these meanings unaltered, as they were outside it" (Adorno 1977, 178). For Adorno, the formal principles of literature lie in the dialectic between the 'rudiments' of external meanings (or "the irreducibly non-artistic elements", *Ibid*.179) and its formalist configurations. Through this dialectic, the meanings employed in the text are

The formal and the semantic form a complex that is dynamic and temporal. The conjoined artfulness and textfulness of literature create a *friction*, a tension between its gesturing towards transcendence and the worn-down meanings it has to reanimate time and again. This friction allows for literature to transform reference from inside out. In the next chapter, this tension between artfulness and textfulness is seen from the reader's point of view, in a model for the literary experience as defamiliarization.

Chapter 4: Defamiliarization and Literariness: Cutting Through Habitualized Perspectives

We are what we are able to see (hear, taste, smell, feel) even more profoundly than we are what furniture of ideas we have in our heads.

—Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility", 1965.

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1871.

By way of a proposal of the reading experience that is specific for literature and related to the ethical, I will provide an introduction to the interrelated concepts of foregrounding, literariness and, most importantly, defamiliarization. I will discuss Viktor Shklovsky's seminal essay "Art as a Technique" for an outline of *ostranenie* and its effects on readers, followed by the outlining of a model for a the reading experience based on defamiliarization, drawing on the reader response research of David Miall and Don Kuiken. I will conclude with a reflection on defamiliarization as an experience of the formal process of perceiving, thinking and feeling, which can be described as a momentary move away from the world, followed return to it with an enriched perceptual outlook. This asks for an attitude of openness, a willingness to engage with the transforming potential of the text; herein lie the ethical implications of defamiliarization for our ways of attending to otherness.

4.1 Defamiliarization in the History of Literary Criticism

The concept of defamiliarization, the idea that the stylistic features of a literary text deautomatize perception, has left a certain trace throughout the history of literary criticism. It can be discerned as one of the focal points of a tradition that, instigated by the Romantic theorists at the beginning of the 19th Century (most notably Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley), runs through the Russian Formalists under the leadership of Viktor Shklovsky to the Prague Linguistic Circle, as exemplified by the work of Jan Mukarovský, at the beginning of the 20th century (Cf. Miall and Kuiken 1994b). What these various theories of literature have in common, is the conviction that literary discourse is experienced and interpreted in ways other than those in which we encounter nonliterary discourse. Central to

this difference are the feelings evoked by literature, its effects of defamiliarization, and an enriched mode of response—these elements keep resurfacing in defamiliarization theory.

Coleridge, most prominently, has expressed his belief that literature exists to overcome the automatic nature of our customary, everyday perception. The employment of metres, for instance, "not only dictates, but of itself tends to produce, a more frequent employment of picturesque and vivifying language, than would be natural in any other case" (Coleridge 1983, 65). This potentially effectuates an "increase [in] the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention" (*Ibid*.66). In reverence for the work of Wordsworth he refers to the latter's skill in "combin[ing] the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar" (*Ibid*.81). Correspondingly, Shelley depicts the unique effects of poetic language by asserting that it "purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being" (Shelley 1988, 295).

What these theorists share is the idea that poetry transcends the limits of habitual perception, and thus facilitates a vision of some aspect of the world as if it were represented itself to us freshly, for the first time. One and the same object has the power to enable such an experience repeatedly: as Coleridge has it, poetic language can "[rescue] the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstances of their universal admission" (Coleridge 1983, 98), and that is what keeps readers from somnolence and immunity for the experience. Every re-reading may allow for new perspectives on the particularities of a text. Coleridge reserves an important space for the reader's feeling—in his famous definition in *Biographia Literaria* the poetic imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (*Ibid*.304). Imagination is said to stir in the reader feelings of sympathy and interest. What these accounts have in common is the notion that poetry revitalizes feelings that were dulled or blunted.

4.2 Literariness and Foregrounding as Unchanging Essence

A similar take on the uniqueness of poetic language is to be found in the far more technical, systematic endeavors of the Prague Circle linguists. The term 'literariness' (*literaturnost*) was first used in 1921 by Roman Jakobson, who made a distinction between literary and prosaic language, or poetics and linguistics. He believed that the literary scholar should take away all the phenomenal heterogeneity of poetic works and focus on the essence that grants them their

categorical identity. The residue of this act of phenomenological reduction Jakobson baptized 'literariness,' and it became the first principle of a new poetics. He discerned six functions of language, based on a dynamics between sender, receiver, contact, message, code, and context—in every act of language, one of these circumstances determines the nature of the language that is used, in other words, is dominant. The poetic function of language prevails when there is a stress on the message for its own sake.[48] For Jakobson the literary work is first and foremost a linguistic fact, a special use of language characterized by a maximal, radical engagement of linguistic structure. Literariness, in his understanding, is an unchangeable essence, intrinsic to every literary phenomenon. Its "quality of divergence" (*Differenzqualität*), as Victor Erlich demonstrates, has three main levels: deviation from reality, from current uses of referential language, and from the prevailing aesthetic standard (Erlich 1981, 252).

The 'literariness' of literary language, in Jakobson's account, lies in its deviation from everyday language. Jakobson has pointed out a contrast between referential language, which is primarily communicative, and literary or 'poetic' language which draws attention to itself in order to disrupt the communicative function (cf. Dorleijn and Van Boven 2003, 41-78). This calling attention to itself is called *foregrounding* (*aktualisace*), with a term first proposed by Jan Mukarovský, referring to the variety of stylistic variations in literary language. Literariness and foregrounding are found in all sorts of utterances (i.e. proverbs or advertising); a literary work is simply one in which the poetic function is dominant. What is specific to literary language in Mukarovský's view, is that foregrounding appears in a *structured*, systematic way (Mukarovský 1964, 20). There is no clear-cut binary dividing literary from non-literary language: "foregrounded features occur in a continuum of texts from the clearly literary to the clearly non-literary" (Miall and Kuiken 1998, 28).

Foregrounding can be manifest at different levels: it can be effected through stylistic features within phrases, but also in narrative structure, deformations of the temporal framework, devices that present a shift in point of view, or free indirect discourse, providing insights into character perspectives. Foregrounded elements can deviate in relation to the norms of communicative language or the contemporarily prevailing aesthetic, or contrast with the style or narrative of the text in which they occur. Besides manifesting the literariness of

[48] This is Jakobson's complete model: he assigns the emotive function to a stress on sender , the conative function to receiver, the phatic function to contact, the poetic function to message, the metalingual function to code, and the referential function to context (Dorleijn and van Boven 2003, 71-4).

discourse, structured foregrounding also construes the identity of a particular literary text, which explains the sense of uniqueness a reader attributes to it, and that is often detected but hardly explicable, following from the shared nature of the medium language. The Russian Formalists called attention to the importance of the literary device or technique, designating a variety of features, mostly linguistic, distinctive for literary texts and initiating defamiliarization. The project of classifying and explicating these features was later carried on by the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, most prominently Jakobson and Mukarovský.

The act of communication that normally characterizes language begets a subsidiary character in literature. The reader's major center of attention is style, since in the literary text, stylistic foregrounding reaches a maximum of intensity: as primary aim of expression, it makes communication into a side effect of its own act. Foregrounding is not in any way subservient, functions only to highlight the act of literary language (Mukarovský 1964, 19). Still, literature has a communicative function, but in order to allow for language to express meanings with unusual intricacy and complexity, this function has to be subjugated: "[w]hen used poetically, words and groups of words evoke a greater richness of images and feelings than if they were to occur in a communicative utterance. A word always expresses a richer meaning in poetry than in communication" (Mukarovský 1977, 73). Language, when used literarily, brings to the reader's mind a greater variety of associations in the form of images and feelings, than when employed communicatively. In this sense, stylistic devices enrich the meaning of individual units of language (words, phrases) "by clusters of images which are not proper to any of them if used outside of this given euphonic association" (*Ibid*.75). Structured foregrounding invites a more vivid and personal response from its reader. Thus literature questions and complicates the conventional relationship between the utterances in the text and their referents (*Ibid*.70).

Whereas Jakobson located the literariness of literature exclusively in the characteristics of the text, I wish to depart from his suggestion that literariness be defined as a characteristic set of text properties. Instead, I wish to approach literariness as an assemblage of specific effects, which add up to an experience that can be designated as distinctly literary—while still occurring, in gradients, elsewhere. With 'literariness,' I mean the process in which foregrounding and defamiliarization are interrelated, a *product* of reading, the conjoining of stylistic presentations with defamiliarizing effects on the reader. This way, in line with what I have argued in defense of style, the experience is defined not by its object,

which is literary form, but by its typical *form* of experiencing.

4.3 Against a 'Graveyard of Language': Shklovsky's "Art as a Technique"

The theory of defamiliarization was systematically set out for the first time by Viktor Shklovsky who has categorized the effects of the foregrounding of language in his influential essay "Art as Technique" (1917). This has been attributed the status of manifesto, the most important statements made of early Formalist thought. As the school's intellectual leader, Shklovsky causes a break in tradition: he does away with the only other aesthetic approach available at that time and place. In this seminal essay he attempts to formulate an answer to the question of what is distinctive about readers' responses to foregrounding, what are the effects of literary style. The answer he proposes, *ostranenie*—literally, "a making strange"—proceeds to a poetics, a theory reflecting on both critical methodology and the materials of art. It is a prescriptive theory for literary criticism and a theory of what art *is*, and should do. In this essay, a central place is reserved for the aesthetic perception—with the double agenda of defending Futurist experimental poetry, protesting against a prevailing "graveyard" of language (Shklovsky 1973)—and in this context numerous key Formalist concepts are defined: defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), devices or techniques, poetic language as opposed to practical language, to name a few. Although the term *literaturnost* does not occur once in this essay, "Art as a technique" can be pointed at as the conception of an approach to 'literariness' in practice, the theory that filled up Jakobson's category.

The essay begins with a critique of the poetic theory of Alexander Potebnya was the first to propose a strict separation of poetry and prose, based on the manner in which both depended upon language, thus forming two distinct approaches. He argued that the focus of a 'literary studies proper' should be on language, and that the problem at the heart of such a study is to describe the particular nature of poetic (aesthetic) language as opposed to prose (practical language). But for the goal of defining the specifics of this literary language, he, too, came to approach literature from the theory of another discipline: philology. For Potebnya, all poetic language was in essence metaphor: presenting the unknown in terms of the known, replacing the 'strange,' the abstract and unattainable, by something familiar. This way he turns poetry into a modality conveying a 'higher truth'.

Shklovsky takes issue: he starts his essay by critiquing the widespread view of art as a 'thinking in images,' images being the vehicles that present the unknown in terms of the

known. First he argues that, if art did consist of images, art history would be the history of images. The opposite is true: in practice we find that images are shared by everyone; they change very little throughout periods and oeuvres. No poet 'owns' a range of images, they are always found elsewhere. Images form the 'raw material' for poets, who are far more occupied with *arranging* than producing them.[49] What characterizes works of art in the narrow sense (what is *intended* for artistic purposes) are the special techniques, or devices (*priyomy*), that make these works artistic. Poetic imagery is only one of these techniques, and in no respect more important than the others.

Explicating Potebnya's error, Shklovsky carries on to explain that the adage 'art is thinking in images' stems from the then-dominant idea of an 'economy of creative effort,' the assumption that literature is language made apprehensible while demanding the least of the reader's mental effort, making abstract, unfamiliar ideas as easily graspable and digestible as is feasible. Shklovsky attacks this notion of literature having the effect of economizing the attention of the reader: whereas generally applicable to language's referential use, attributed to poetic language the belief in an economy of mental effort is completely erroneous. In fact, his argument goes the exact opposite way, for art might very well form one of the rare exceptions to this rule. All objects of perception repeatedly presenting themselves to us in daily life eventually become unconscious: as one of the general laws of perception, they get familiar to the point that we simply stop being aware of them. This is what Shklovsky means by the habitualization or (over)automatization of the world around us: the law of 'economy of perceptive effort' is at its strongest here, perception becomes habitual, 'unconsciously automatic,' minimal. To make the world as controllable as possible, to domesticate it, we have learnt to ignore, to filter out: "[h]abitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (Shklovsky 1965, 12).

Experiencing literary art, for Shklovsky, is the creation of renewed perception to overcome automatization: whereas automatization schematizes an object or event, foregrounding violates the scheme. This is not done by any economy whatsoever: instead of drawing attention to the object, art demands a focus on its *artfulness*, by obstructing, confusing and prolonging perception. Time, most importantly the aesthetic expansion of duration, has a special position in Shklovsky's theory, though balanced by an insistence on the

[49] In this context 'poetry' and 'literature' can be used interchangeably. 'Poetry,' for formalist theorists, is a synonym of 'poetic' language, as opposed to the prosaic—everyday, communicative, referential—use of language, literature falls under this characterization (artful use of language).

spatial dimension of perception—for instance, when he describes *ostranenie* as tearing the object loose from its place in life, robbing it of its usual associations and rotating it in its semantic space "as one would turn a log in the fire" (Shklovsky 2009, 61), to dwell on every side of its tangible form. The price-tag of prolonged and enriched perception is, logically, the extended period of time that is needed to 'digest' and identify the defamiliarized object in its foregrounded capacity, the heightened attention that the impenetrability of literary language asks of us. Renewal of perception includes the material quality of language as well, a sudden awareness of its very textures and surfaces.

Shklovsky draws on passages from Leo Tolstoy's work to illustrate the different techniques with which literature goes against automatic perception, forcing us to notice, to be aware. He quotes a passage from Tolstoy's diary recounting a sudden awareness of his moving about his house robotically: "If … no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they have never been" (Shklovsky 1965, 12).[50] Shklovsky makes a distinction between 'recognition,' understanding an object based on conventional categories and preconceptions, and 'seeing,' perceiving the object as revealed through art, in an active, dynamic experience of perception brought into life by stylistic techniques. All these devices he then assembles under the conceptual umbrella of 'defamiliarization' (*ostranenie*): a historically elegant concept, since its effect came down to "turn[ing] Potebnyaism upside down" (Lemon and Reis 1965, 4).

While Potebnya regarded the image as an instrument for *knowing* the object it represented, in Shklovsky's view poetical language creates a *vision* of the image: defamiliarization is the reversal of 'presenting the unknown in terms of the known'. Moreover, if defamiliarization can be described as implying another psychological law, this law would differ radically in nature from those of Potebnya, which the concept is meant to overthrow. The latter proposed the metaphor as conservation of energy expenditure; in this economy-model, metaphors have a certain *content* that is communicated, whereas defamiliarization only demarcates a *form*. The new theory of *ostranenie* is not meant to imply anything about the *sort* of perceptions which have grown habitual and are to be renewed: content, either metaphysical or social, is for Shklovsky merely a pretext for the renewal of

[50] Leo Tolstoy's *Diary*, entry dated February 29, 1897. In the alternative edition of the essay included in *Theory of Prose*, the citation consists of an additional sentence: "And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness" (Shklovsky 1965, 5).

perception in any way possible. The process of renewing these perceptions is a goal in itself for literature: a goal that precludes any form of closure.

The function of style in literature is to enrich impoverished perception by challenging familiar economies of comprehension. When separated from practical, prosaic language, poetry—literature—as a medium works according to its own laws. Accordingly, literature does not in the first place have to represent or *mean* anything, although reference and signification are inescapable: it has to *be*. This is what makes it first and foremost an experience instead of propositional knowledge in the form of a statement or an answer to a question, as Sontag remarked in "On Style": "Art is not only about something, it is something. A thing *in* the world, not just a commentary *on* the world" (Sontag 1965b, 21). And, as will become clear, this experience is characterized by a certain mental form. While a text is just another object, it does something to our way of seeing the world. The stylistic devices or techniques of poetic language, far from evoking familiar concepts, create a "special perception" or a "vision" of the object "*instead of serving as a means for knowing it*." (Shklovsky 1965, 18). This vision is then juxtaposed to recognition, understanding an object based on existing schemes, ranging the particular under abstract categories. It is less a matter of signification, of grasping meaning, than of an experience: the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must therefore be extended.

In the experience, Shklovsky claims, the sensation of life can be rediscovered: the purpose of art is to make us perceive anew, to make our surroundings strange, to "make the stone *stony*" (*Ibid*.12). By this phrase is meant that the 'making strange' of literature through devices increases perception in length and intensity: when reading it is as if we see, hear and feel more vividly. Seeing it 'as if for the first time' does not mean a vision that is more true, or a retrieval of any lost primary or originary perception of an object, and it does not imply anything about reality or promise a more objective vision: it simply means that we *see*—feel, hear, smell, taste—again, and this act of perception is what causes a renewed awareness.

4.4 Transformation of Conventional Perspectives and Reader Response

David Miall and Don Kuiken conduct reader response research focused on the effects of literary style and defamiliarization, putting the alleged relation between foregrounding and reader's responses to the test. These scholars conceive of their empirical studies as a continuation of the tradition of the 'defamiliarization theories' referred to. Based on common

threads in these theories, they have formulated a proposal for a psychological process undergone by readers when they are exposed to literariness. Miall and Kuiken particularly investigate in the interrelatedness of defamiliarization, affect, and personal perspectives and meanings, in which they locate a form of comprehension that is distinctly literary.

Their studies with passages from literary short stories (varying from realist to modernist) show that foregrounding is associated with prolonged reading time, greater 'strikingness ratings' (a reader is more inclined to attribute, for instance, 'beauty' to the text), and greater affect ratings (the measure of evocation of the reader's feelings).[51] In this, preliminary evidence is found for Shklovsky's assertion that stylistic foregrounding renders the perceptual process "long and laborious", to extend it to the fullest (Shklovsky 1965, 6).

Miall and Kuiken propose that readers undergo a segmented psychological process when exposed to foregrounding, consisting of three steps: textual segments which deviate from communicative language cause defamiliarization, which invokes feelings, and feelings guide 'refamiliarizing' cognitive work, in a process which challenges the reader's conventional perspectives.[52] All of three these three components (stylistic variation, defamiliarization, refamiliarizing transformations) must be interactively present in a dynamics for literariness to be constituted. These principles provide us with a model for the literary response as an event; literariness is the product of a distinctive mode of reading that is identifiable through these three key components of response. Literary meaning, as shall be elaborated upon, is the result of a cooperation between the formal properties of the text and the contingent, context-bound construal of the *individual* reader (Miall 1998, 13).

The need for interpretation posed by literature is here thought to be caused by the effects of foregrounding on affect, which explains the prolonged time it takes to read literary passages. These feelings play a decisive role: invoked by foregrounded elements in the text they trigger 'refamiliarizing' interpretive efforts on the reader's part. Given the stress on interpretations in practices of literary criticism it is quite commonplace that literature, through a variety of foregrounding strategies causing complexity and ambiguity, necessitates cognitive

[51] For instance, at the *phonetic* level, foregrounded passages may effectuate a realization of the reader's feeling connotations; at the *grammatical* level, she may strive to comprehend particular difficulties; at the *semantic* level, lengthy reflection may be required to identify less salient--often affective—attributes. Hierarchical arrangement of foregrounding around a dominant, as Jakobson proposed, may necessitate a combination of responses to an amalgam of the phonetic, grammatical *and* semantic features of a text (Miall and Kuiken 1994b, 13).

[52] Although the encounter with foregrounded elements plays a decisive role in the interpretive endeavors of the reader, there are other conditions of influence which can play a part here, for instance. knowledge of the genre and narrative features of the text (Miall and Kuiken 1998, 28).

efforts on the part of the reader; more interesting is the realization that this labor is instigated and partly led by affect, which is therefore a constructive element in the literary experience. In formulating an understanding of the text that has been 'made strange' or indeterminate, the reader's feelings provide a guide-line, hence they are essential to process: "[w]hen perception has been deautomatized, a reader employs the feelings that have been evoked to find or to create a context in which the defamiliarized aspects of the story can be located" (Miall and Kuiken 1994b, 7). Stylistic devices, in short, induce readers, guided by emergent feelings (which are always to some extent self-referential), to depart from 'prototypic' understandings, to construct more personal meanings (Miall and Kuiken 1994a, 2, 10).

This offers a more substantive explication for Shklovsky's claim that in creating an 'enriched' perception, *differences* in perspective and history from one reader to another, matter at least as much as their common features—which explains how reading experiences diverge significantly between individuals from the same community, and even between subsequent readings by one reader. The 'strikingness' of literary texts emerges against a background of all the things that, by habitualization or automatization, we have become overly familiar with to the point of impoverished awareness. The ability to distinguish foregrounded elements and recognize literariness is not determined by the culture we live in, our erudition and our literary competence, education, or previous experience with literary texts—it depends on linguistic competence mostly (Miall and Kuiken 1994b, 36). This is explained by the proposition, earlier expressed by the Formalists, that "foregrounding achieves its effects in relation to norms of language use outside of literature, rather than … in relation to norms established within especially trained communities with particular perspectives on what is literary" (Ibid.38). This is of vital importance since it means that our conventional perspective does not conduct the reading experience: it is exactly this perspective that the experience challenges (Miall and Kuiken 1999, 14): foregrounding and defamiliarization work against a background of familiarity.

The 'richness' of these new perceptions earlier remarked upon by Coleridge and Shklovsky, lies in the capacity of affect to set in motion alternative interpretations that are more rewarding than conventionally informed ones.[53] While textual elements common to

[53] Miall and Kuiken expect that readers first employ familiar concepts in an endeavor to comprehend the literary text, thus situating the text within an existing script or schema of their understanding, catalyzing a "bottom-up process of word and sentence interpretation ... with several prototypic propositions being activated" (Miall and Kuiken 1994a, 32). Simultaneously, the adequacy of these immediate, prototypic concept is challenged. As

literary and nonliterary discourse, like story grammars, genres and certain schemata, in their own way serve an economy of interpretative work or 'creative effort,' stylistic variations go *against* these economizing effects: they obscure our comprehension of the text by challenging the familiarized or 'prototypic' concepts that readers bring to the text in an attempt at refamiliarization (Miall and Kuiken 1994a, 20). In this realm, due to the making strange or *ostranenie* by devices, economies of understanding do not reign. Therefore, *pace* prevalent institution-based or foundationalist theories, Miall and Kuiken are wary of the application of theories of non-literary discourse to acts of literature: these generally stress the reader's uncertainty that has to be *overcome* in order to form interpretations directed at concrete, unambiguously reproducible meanings. Defamiliarization theory works differently: it calls attention to the reader's affective experience of the obscure presentation of multifaceted meanings: of ambiguity, in other words (*Ibid*.29).

Foregrounding instantiates a mode of 'processing' different from regular discourse: one that involves the creation of new schemas instead of the expansion or adaptation of existing ones (Miall and Kuiken 1998, 27). The feelings experienced invoke the contexts of earlier occurrences of similar feelings; the perceived correspondences that allow for such a reinstatement "cut across conventionally scripted boundaries" (Miall and Kuiken 2002, 14). The challenge posed to our familiar modes of feeling and to prototypic concepts calls for new perspectives that intersect existing cognitive domains (*Ibid*.18). Thus, in the search for an appropriate context for feelings and concepts confronted with in the literary experience, conventional, familiar concepts and feelings are transformed, made to seem less familiar, as if there were something 'more' to them that cannot be grasped at once.

This process can be illustrated by an actual reader's associative rendering of an initial re-familiarizing effort that Miall and Kuiken have come across on the occasion of a qualitative assessment of responses to Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1797)[54]:

I'm just going to share the emotion of being alone, in the dark, with this threat.

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likely meanings to the text come into shape and beget a sharper definition, these often go beyond the initial familiar concepts.

[54] The lines in question read:
Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (446-51).

> Knowing that there's nothing you can do about it, keeping on walking and pretending it's not happening, just because there's no other way to cope with it, you can't run from it. All you can do is hope that somehow or other it magically just disappears and leaves you alone. Loneliness is being, having no one around to help you, feeling like you're the only person because, there's nobody else that's near enough to do you any good, so when this being decides to grab you, it doesn't matter if there's 40 million other people in the world, if none of them are there to save you from this. I also sense there's no point in fighting this because, like it's a guilt thing, he's the one that's responsible for what's happened, he's the reason that this thing is following him, so there is no point in trying to get away from it because, it's your fate. It's just a bit of a reminder that everybody dies. Whatever's following him is going to get him. You don't know how long it's going to go and you don't know when it's going to get him, but you know that eventually that it will. (Miall and Kuiken 2002, 23)

This account reflects heightened feeling, which is colored personally from its hesitant start ("I'm just going to share the emotion of being alone"). This feeling then seems to reverberate some underlying concept about the self (repeated use of the pronoun 'you,' used alternately with 'I' and later 'he'). In keeping with the segmented process of defamiliarization, then, this feeling is explored, 'zoomed in' upon with the help of the poem. At the same time the reader tries to unravel a possible meaning of the poem in the light of this personal feeling, and very much related to it: "Loneliness is being, having no one around to help you". Trying to understand the protagonist's predicament is part of it, but it is shortly extended to all people: "it's *your* fate".[55]

In one and the same process as that of interpretation, of coming to terms with the meaning of the text, the reader's self-concept is implicated and a new perspective on an 'old' realization formed. This is not some unattainable supra-experiential truth conveyed by easily graspable images, as Potebnya understood it. This reader gives an experiential account of one of the most worn-out, over-familiarized, obvious cliché's in the world: that everybody dies, and that everybody dies *alone* (an insight that, according to Derrida, lies at the heart of encountering otherness, as will be discussed in the next chapter). Through the experience of the poem, this insight is made personal, felt through, and revitalized. The reader feels *included* in this piece of knowledge that is normally taken at face value. For a moment, then 'everybody dies' is the object of renewed awareness, it is rescued from the graveyard of

[55] For an indebt, technical analysis of responses to this poem, see Miall and Kuiken 2002. For similar analyses of various verbal responses to other poems and stories, see Miall and Kuiken's texts in Works Cited.

language. This is a poignant example of a tentative attempt at refamiliarization followed by the experience of defamiliarization, because one is hard-pressed to find an object more familiarized.

This begins to show a relation between the transformation of perception and a reader's sense of self. Perspectives we have semi-consciously attained are liable to shifts in an act of literature that reshapes them, providing us with greater flexibility. In the search for a new context in which we can place the elements 'made strange' in a text, in order to refamiliarize them, we use the ('conventional') feelings and concepts that we have at our disposal. This new context often has to be created ad hoc (Miall and Kuiken 1998, 28),[56] since we do not have a pre-existing 'script' or schema for the incompatible domains foregrounding brings into existence—this is called "schema-refreshment" (Miall and Kuiken 1999, 16). In the new frame, our feelings and concepts are brought into new relations which are not conceivable in everyday life, and this way they are transformed in the process of refamiliarization (*Ibid*.4).

In order to clarify the role of the imagination in this process of refamiliarizing the text, it is illustrative to revisit Kant's aesthetics again, to reiterate his notion of *aesthetic ideas* in particular. As stressed, the Kantian aesthetic experience entails a harmonic interplay between the imagination and our understanding. In this process, the imagination generates all kinds of associations invoked by the feelings an object, the literary work in this case, inspires in us. These associations are aesthetic ideas, representations which give food for much thought, without ever coming to a fixed point of knowledge. The imagination makes the rules of this game and integrates the ideas into sequences, which the understanding attempts to grasp, to follow. Besides guiding the sequences of association, the imagination is the subject of this play, focusing on its own activity, without external goals to be arrived at. This way, the limits of our habits of knowing the world come to the fore: we become aware of the workings of our imagination, without arriving at a fixed concept to label this new insights with.

Normally, the imagination *re*produces things we objectively know about the world: it always works *in service of something else*—this, then, can be aligned with Shklovsky's recognition, with bringing the particular under general categories. In an aesthetic experience, the imagination works reflective, constantly reconfiguring defamiliarized fragments in new and creative ways. That no knowledge in the objective sense can result from this, does not

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instead of transforming our existing schemes or frames of reference, we are incited to create altogether new ones (Miall and Kuiken 1998, 28); Cf. Miall and Kuiken 2002, 18-19

mean that absolutely no new insights are to be gained from the experience: we are permeated with the truth that there is more to be thought, than can ever be brought under defined concepts. It is knowledge of a different mental *form*. Although Kant does not speak of defamiliarization, the basic idea of generating new configurations of ideas in the imagination, guided by the feelings the experience invokes in us, *is* refamiliarizing, attempting to put foregrounded elements into a coherent whole. The imagination is needed to 'make sense' of the ambiguous text.

4.5 Unsettling the Self: Defamiliarization and Self-Understanding

That these playful imaginative enterprises can lead to a transformation of self-sense and outlook on the world, is due to their involving affect. Affect is self-implicating, vital to our self-understanding, and possibly causes the reader's self-concept to be modified in the experience of reading. It could be, for instance, that she faces an 'old' feeling she has about herself, which is then recontextualized in the light of 'fresh' ones aroused through reading. This could cause a change in current feelings about the self, reshaped by the ones the reader assessed to 'make sense,' to refamiliarize the narrative (Miall and Kuiken 2002, 37). This way, ultimately, feelings of defamiliarization "embody alternative ways of construing the self and its position and effect in the world" (Miall 1998, 18). The reader's 'sense of self' is challenged and possibly transformed. Through this renewal of our modes of feeling and perceiving, the reading of literary texts can inspire alternative ways of understanding the self, and its relations to the world it inhabits.

The significance of this transformation for the literary experience can be elucidated by looking at the sorts of feelings effectuated through reading: Miall and Kuiken have categorized four different areas of affect, each dependent upon different structures and processes. The first group comprises *evaluative feelings* toward the text as a whole, such as pleasure and suspense; the second domain concerns *narrative feelings* toward events and characters in the imagined world of the text, such as empathy. These are replicative or mimetically ('mirror') represent the text fairly faithfully—for these affects, no transformation of perspectives is necessary:

> [t]o mimetically engage a scene in a text, such as imagining oneself in the position of a character, draws upon the same social skills that enable us to understand others and maintain an appropriate stance towards them. For that reason, it seems likely that

> narrative feelings will show emotions running on conventional, pre-scripted lines. (Miall and Kuiken 2002, 7)

This shows that, though empathetic engagement with characters is certainly one of the returning components of the reading experience, the feelings it entails are not typical for the *literary* experience. As I argued in chapter two through my reading of *Saturday*, empathy ultimately depends on recognition (instead of Shklovsky's vision), without posing the need to adopt a different perspective.

Nor is judging—as, for instance Carroll deemed vital—appropriate for the experience of a text as literary: feelings caused by defamiliarization are invoked before a provisional judgment is formed (Miall and Kuiken 1999, 4), hence a suspension of judgment is essential for the literary experience. Acting on the feelings, the literary text sabotages our everyday habits of judgment, pointing to their limitations. Certainly literary texts often represent events that are unambiguously depicted as morally good or bad, and characters we relate to and empathize with, but since this insight is an outcome, a product of our interpretation rather than a link in the process leading towards it, judgments of this kind are not vital to the literary experience. The third realm of affects is that of *aesthetic feelings* in response to the formal components of a text. Finally, *self-modifying feelings* challenge the reader's familiar concepts and perspectives and her sense of self. These self-modifying feelings form the category of affect unique to literary reading (Miall and Kuiken 2002, 4).

So when we accept the proposition posed here, that defamiliarization catalyzes in the reader of the literary text a process of transformation, this begins to counterbalance the prevalent axioms of a significant part of contemporary literary scholarship. Since the end of 'liberal humanist' domination, theorists have postulated that 'literariness' does not exist: there allegedly are no innately 'literary' properties. Instead, the literary object is instated by conventions (Cf. Eagleton 2001). As discussed in the first chapter, this had led to literature being perceived as 'merely' one discourse among many others (Cf. Bernheimer 1993). When we understand defamiliarization as a psychological process dependent upon an interaction between stylistic foregrounding and the reader's highly personal, context-bound perspective, I see no objections to arguing for the literariness of this effect. Besides possibly having a message to communicate, a social or political reality to refer to, or contextual (educational or institutional) conditions which determine it, a text becomes literary when it triggers an experience of a certain form, a form of psychological transformation. 'Literary' is the

interaction between foregrounding, defamiliarization and the transformation of conventional perspectives through refamiliarizing efforts.[57] In the end, this challenge that literary reading can pose to the reader's conventional perspectives and self concept can be seen as the feature that distinguishes literature as an experience, a mode of reading, from other types of text (Miall 1998, 17). It ultimately appears to be the effect that belongs most distinctively and uniquely to literary texts, and it lies precisely in their capacity as artful language, or textual art. It grants advantages that are not obtainable through "any other medium or activity" (*Ibid*.43)—that is, of course, if we are open to it.[58]

This 'openness' does not speak for itself since the process by which refamiliarization can change our notion of self, and the unpredictability of the feelings invoked, can have an *unsettling* effect. Being aware that our ideas, feelings, perception and self-sense are not fixed can incite us to reconsider our own limits, what it means to 'be' an identity. Where contradictory feelings are evoked, causing the reader to conjoin the own feelings and beliefs with those expressed in the text, disorientation, or temporary psychological dislocation are possibly effected (Miall and Kuiken 1999, 5). This unsettling of the self explains how literature can make us nervous: we do not always wish for our feelings and psyches to be transformed or dislocated. This is related to the fact that defamiliarized objects often incite contradictory feelings, appealing and confronting at once, and, in Sontag's words, "[w]hatever is wholly mysterious is at once both psychologically relieving and anxiety-provoking" (Sontag 1967a, 29). Of readers, a certain openness is therefore asked, a willingness to offer the imagination for refamiliarization to take place, for literature to become an *experience*: "[a]rt is seduction, not rape" (Sontag 1965b, 22). This response and openness asked of readers is what relates the attitude requisite to defamiliarization to a certain form of ethics, as the next and final chapter of this thesis will make clear.

The friction between artfulness and textfulness as characterized in the last chapter, can now be said to catalyze, through the segmented process of defamiliarization and refamiliarization, and experience that combines a transcendent element, that is necessarily

[57] The *interaction* between these is indeed of vital importance since each individual component of literariness may occur on its own in other domains: foregrounding is omnipresent in the world of advertising, as famously illustrated by Jakobson with "I Like Ike" (Dorleijn and van Boven 2003, 61). Miall and Kuiken mention traumatic events as another example, for these can incite a transformation of conventional concepts and feelings as well (Miall and Kuiken 1999, 5).

[58] In "Anticipation and feeling in literary response: a neuropsychological perspective", Miall turns to neuropsychological research to confirm this, concluding that "[t]he anticipatory function of literature provides degrees of freedom in our thinking and feeling that are perhaps only rarely available elsewhere" (Miall 1995, 53).

incomplete because of language's meaning, and a subsequent return to our with altered perception. Literature, is has been said, entails a move *away* from the world. To become involved with it can be said to entail a sense of temporarily distancing, follows from the character of artistic style as schematized, detached and obscured. Style is constituted by the degree and manipulation of this distance, by artificiality and conventionality. However, other than the Kantian pure aesthetic, in the literary experience this is necessarily followed by a move *back* (Sontag 1965b, 28, 30). The overcoming or transcending of the world is also a way of encountering it in new ways, and of training the will to be in the world (*Ibid*.31). Whereas post-Kantian beauty-enthusiast, pertaining to a transcendent, totalizing aesthetics, tend to forget the second step, ethical critics with a knack for transposing the content of literary novels straightforwardly onto reality, tend to ignore the first. On a similar note, in *Demeure*, Derrida writes that "the possibility of fiction has structured—but with a fracture—what is called real experience. This constituting structure is a destructuring experience" (Derrida 2000, 92). It makes us perceive the world anew.

In the end, it is this different *form* of experience, this play of refamiliarization in the imagination, that links literature to a certain form of ethics. Literature can pose an assault to every form of rigidity and fixity in thinking and feeling, which ultimately links it to the ethical. As a way of refurbishing experiential awareness, breaking through numbing, mechanical habits of perception and conduct, enabling the reader to be reborn in the world of existential freshness, defamiliarization assumes the form of a psychological principle with profound implications that touch upon the ethical. Now what is left to investigate, is the move from the defamiliarizing experience to encounters with otherness.

Chapter 5: Defamiliarization and the Other: On Beauty and the Ethics of Asymmetry

We have established that, since defamiliarization calls for an openness in one's responses, a willingness to let existing configurations of feelings and concepts concerning the self be transformed, to, in effect, allow for the 'self-concept' to be disrupted and challenged. The question left to answer, is how this demand for openness links to an ethical attitude towards human others, or, how do we extend a disruptive reading experience to the numerous demands posed by the encounters with others in our daily lives, in a particular society? How do we move from a one-on-one relating between a specific reader and a specific text to the realm of interpersonal and social conduct? To come to an answer, I place the defamiliarizing effects of literary reading in a Levinasian-cum-Derridean framework, in which ethics is characterized by a fundamental asymmetry. Could defamiliarization lead to a more just society or equal social relations? In other words, what are the limits of this process and its transformative effects?

5.1 From Defamiliarization to Otherness

Overcoming automatized habits of thinking and perceiving and thus attaining a renewed awareness could not occur on its own account. The shift in perception from recognition of a certain object firmly subsumed under a conceptual category according to an economy of mental effort, to a new vision of what we have not yet grasped, entails a certain risk, requires us to relinquish, to some extent, the control over our emotional and intellectual state. This control can be said to be surrendered to 'the other,' in a secularized Levinasian account of otherness as proposed by Derek Attridge (see for example Attridge 2004b).[59] Here, the other is not some mysterious extra-cultural entity, unrelated to that which is known: it is defined as an "unprecedented, hitherto unimaginable disposition of cultural materials" (Attridge 2004b, 63), until then "unthought and unthinkable" (Attridge 1999, 23). Otherness is what lies

[59] Levinas poses as other a pre-existing entity that is encountered by the self: often called 'Autrui' instead of 'l'autre' to underscore its human dimension, this notion of the Other is closely related to the biblical 'neighbor,' although it is in fact always but an instance of the otherness of God (Levinas 1997). Here, as in for instance postcolonial theories, the other is construed first and foremost an external interruption or intrusion, challenging assumptions, habits and values while demanding a response from the 'self' (Attridge 2004, 123). The link with the 'making strange' and transformative aspects of defamiliarizing reading is already noticeable here; Attridge's other has the added benefit that it does not refer to a pre-existing entity, but to a highly personal 'hitherto-unknown' brought about by the creative 'act-events' of reading and writing in their singularity.

outside the horizon set by culture as embodied in the individual, outside the possibilities accessible at any given time for perception, feeling, imagination, understanding and thought (*Ibid*.20). In consenting to the familiar being reconfigured or broken down, we pave the way for the 'cutting through' of existing schemata by the other.

If the fixed schemes and scripts in a reader's mind are stimulated, through foregrounded passages in literature, to be opened up, to be disrupted in order for refamiliarizing imaginative effort to effectuate schema-refreshment, as discussed, this reader's self-sense will not have been left unaltered. Defamiliarizing reading experiences can be said to bring the other to life, creating it in the imagination, in a reconfiguration of existing thoughts and feelings, through a highly personal refamiliarization. At the same time that the other is brought into being through reading, the self of a reader is created by the other through the disruptive, transformative effects of defamiliarization. Due to these transformative effects, the other originates just as much *inside* of the subject as *outside* of it: in the process, the difference between "inside" and "outside" is blurred. Our sense of an active, integral selfhood collapses in an act of 'psychological dislocation'. Attridge, referring to innovative acts of (the writing of) literature, speaks of the 'welcoming' of otherness as a two-way street (Attridge 1999, 24). By the same token, it can be argued, an experience of defamiliarization followed by refamiliarization entails a bringing-into-being of the other, while the reader is created *by* this other at the same time.

Because of literature's 'double bind' as an act of singularity and generality in one, or as I have chosen to describe it in the last chapter, causing an experience that puts us at a remove of the world, followed by a subsequent—possibly more enriched—return to it, an experience of the other *as such* could never occur. Pure otherness could not even be grasped in the shared medium of language, which makes any literary act inevitably into a refashioning of existing materials from culture. What is experienced instead, is the transformation of the self, of familiar feelings and ideas, that grants the other its existence as no-longer-(completely)-other. From the moment of this creation, the other is relocated in the realm of the same, the self. This realm, however, is not what is used to be: it is transformed, so that the arrival of the other occasions a becoming-other of the same, as well as a same-becoming of the other: in the experience of reading literature as literature, this corresponds to the phase of refamiliarization.

Reading literature can then be seen as posing the challenge to respond to the otherness of the other. Defamiliarization goes against the predisposition of the faculty of reason to turn the other into the same (Shklovsky's 'recognition' is an instance of this). Since the refamiliarizing interpretive work is guided by affect, highly personal and self-implicating, and therefore different for every reader, in fact, for every subsequent reading experience, singularity is at work from the beginning: the relation between this singular text and this singular reader is ungeneralizable. A response to otherness necessitates a suspension of generalizing habits, a readiness to abandon old beliefs and judgments, to change ways of thinking. It is important to note, as we shall see, that this is not another instance of a theoretical effort directed at symmetry, because in this conceptualization, self and other are no longer well-defined and strictly demarcated entities: they only exist in a relating and never lose their singularities.

This 'bi-directionality' of the experience of otherness through literature adds to the attitude requisite to defamiliarizing reading an element of passivity, of allowing the self to be overcome and disrupted or 'relocated' by the other that impinges upon us, as well a sense of activity in the imaginative reconfiguration of 'strange' elements. This is reflected in Attridge's employment of the term "act-event" for the literary work (Attridge 2004b, 108). What is important, is that we get a glimpse of something at the borders of our consciousness, that cannot possibly be grasped through existing schemes or modes of understanding. Even if the familiar is only slightly reconfigured, merely presented in another light or from another angle, the singularity of the other is always absolute. Due to the experience of language made strange always being highly personalized, depending on the own habits of thinking, familiar feelings and concept of self, the other exists only in an active relation, is always other *to* a certain reader, and bound to the context in which the text is read. That which is other to me is always on the verge of becoming same, refamiliarized—moving from the realm of the unknown into the known, from the singular (the experience of something ungraspable through existing modes of thinking and understanding) to the general (after transformations of the self have occurred).

5.2 From the 'Literary' Other to Ethics

To move from this experience of otherness to the sphere of ethics, we first have to ask ourselves how the unsettling experience of defamiliarization touches upon inter-subjective

connections. How does 'the other' as that which gestures on the limits of consciousness in the experience of literary reading relate to the actual other as fellow being who asks for a reaction, for acknowledgement?

In undergoing defamiliarization, the other is other because it has yet to arise, because feeling, thought and understanding need to be transformed to incorporate it—a response-able attitude, here, consists of an openness, a willingness to let the self-concept be altered, as discussed. The *human* other is other because it embodies a different consciousness, a different perceptual centre of the world. Since I cannot move outside my own experience, in this sense, the other person is alien or strange to me, never fully graspable in its singularity. But thus understood, Attridge explains, the human other is not truly other: this is a familiarized notion of otherness, we presuppose it; it does not *confront* us: "I recognize the familiar contours of a human being, which is to say I accommodate him or her to my existing schemata" (Attridge 2004b, 32). The awareness of this being's unique consciousness similar to the own, and impenetrable to it, is knowledge derived from the own sense of selfhood: it is approaching the other as generic person, not as a singular individual, and thus comprises yet another instance of assimilating otherness to sameness.

In its singularity, the other needs to be conceived of as a relating—again, always in a specific time and place—between the self which is 'same,' and that which lies outside it and disturbs my sense of coherence and continuity. It is not until we become aware of a breakdown in the process of accommodation and generalization, when we chance upon a *cul de sac* of categorization, that we acknowledge the other individual's singular otherness and respond to this relating. First, as in the experience prompted by literariness, we will have to own up to the impossibility of employing general rules and schemata for a full-fledged understanding of the other. It is only then that we meet the other *as other*, heterogeneous to the self, in a willingness to temporarily reform our norms of 'personhood' to incorporate his or her singularity. During this process, again as in the experience of the literary text, the subject stumbles upon the limits of the own faculties of thinking and judging, the own capacities as rational agent (Attridge 2004b, 33). We have to preserve the otherness of this other, to acknowledge the irreducibility of this specific relating. In both circumstances, awareness of singularity entails a readiness to have the own fundamental structures of thought transformed—both defamiliarization and ethics demand a "just and generous response to thoughts that have not yet been formulated as thoughts, feelings that as yet have no objective

correlative"(*Ibid*.34). A true response to singularity demands from us to be prepared to embark upon the unknown, and to let it embark upon us.

The ethical demand that a response to singularity makes, is that we be answerable for the other, to be responsible for him or her, for in accepting it we bring it into existence, invite it into our being. This process retains its hazards every time, for it never loses its singularity: there is no saying what came first, the other and this sense of responsibility co-emerge, and there is even "a sense in which the responsibility precedes … the I that is said to accept it, since the act always remakes the actor" (*Ibid*.126). But what are the characteristics of an ethics that precedes the singularities as they interrelate?

Traditional Western philosophy since Plato has, according to Levinas, tended to understand existence as revolving around the central position of the thinking self as an entity pre-existing every relating—as a consequence, philosophy, characterized as it is by an identification of knowledge with abstraction, generalization and systematization, reduces all difference to sameness, assimilates the other to the self. This is what Levinas calls the urge to totalization, destroying the otherness of the other (Cf. Levinas 1991). He juxtaposed this with an ethics that, instead of building on universality and the sameness of people, is focused on their radical alterity, the unavoidable a-symmetry deriving from a notion of the subject always being *in relation to*, situated in a singular context. Relating to the other entails the realization that there exists something that is not me, that surpasses my ontology. Thus, relating puts the egotistical self-sameness of a self-centered ontology into question. This sphere of sameness is suddenly curtailed by the other, its limits become clear. This resistance challenges and disrupts sameness, causing an awareness of the fact that the self is not a self-enclosed totality *prior* to any relating (Levinas 1991, 86).

Ethical decision-making begets an aporetic character due to the limitlessness of responsibility and the irreducibility of (my relation to) the totally-other. An ethics characterized by risk and uncertainty is rendered undecidable. For Derrida, such a relating to the other asks for a response to an irreplaceable singularity that is only given to us in the apprehension of *death*: no matter to what lengths we go to put the other before ourselves, the death of the other cannot possibly be warded off since she can only die *as herself*. In this sense, singularity is established by the inexorable prospect of one's demise. The apprehension of my own death which no other can undergo in my place, thus leads me to responsibility, whilst simultaneously permeating me with an awareness of its impossibility. The experience

of responsibility entails an element of guilt. I always fall short. This makes the Levinasian ethics of responsibility a deeply paradoxical project, that can even be said to envelop its own impossibility. On the other hand, the radical asymmetry of the ethical relation here, places it at a firm remove from conventional morality, and, as we shall see, from social community altogether. This renders it, very much like the literary text, intrinsically un-instrumentalizable.

5.3 The Abyss between Ethics and Morality: Ineffability and Asymmetry

In this non-instrumentality lie the limits of an asymmetrical ethics, as well as it strength. If I may remind the reader of the second chapter of this thesis, Perowne, the protagonist of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, employed a binary standard when it came to aesthetic experiences and ethics: literature and ethics on a political or extra-familial scale were judged too messy, human and impure—the world is not explained by them, they provide no clear-cut answers. What was valued were science and abstract art: inhumanly perfect, harmonious, clear and mechanical. But the abstract transcendence of art and science did not provide him with any clues as to leading an ethically responsible life: they did not lessen his feelings of guilt and insecurity. Real life, with its innumerable claims on our responsibility, is too complex. This gave him a relentless sense of ambiguity about ethical matters which led him to turn away, to retreat into the seclusion of his own circle of beauty, perfection and harmony. He was selective in his empathy.

This points to two important, interrelated considerations about the nature of defamiliarizing experiences as well as the encounter with the other: language and singularity do not go together, and responsibility for otherness is necessarily asymmetrical—it means putting the other before yourself. When we attempt to communicate such an experience afterwards, we necessarily employ language in its communicative or referential use, which is aimed at determination, at a fixation of a finalized meaning of these experiences, so that this meaning can be shared, becomes understandable for multiple others. As Levinas phrases the problem, communicative language serves the goals of ontology (Cf. Levinas 1991).

In the *Gift of Death*, Derrida equals the phrasing of ethical decisions in a shared language to the dissolution of singularity. Linguistic discourse is too universal to capture singularity; therefore ethical responsibility has to remain unspoken. Neither the literary experience, nor the response to the other *as other* can be exhaustively articulated without

throwing singularity away with the bath water. This elusiveness renders any ethical effects of an openness to otherness incalculable, unreliable and unpredictable.

This counters once again the theories discussed in the first chapter, linking beauty to justice: whereas the law relies on justice to legitimize its authority, justice, too, is founded on a response to singularity, hence irreducible to language (Derrida 2000, 62). Even though the law would ideally be informed by it, justice concurrently escapes that law and defies it, as by analogy, ethics as response to singularity can inspire morality, while at the same time it slips through the mazes of fixed systems of morality, and often goes against them. The ethical is based on the recognition of the ultimate unknowability of the other, the impossibility to subsume it under existing categories; the political, the moral and the judicious count on positive, programmatic knowledge, on generalization and prediction (Attridge 2004a, 104-05). We tend to get closest to a responsibility for otherness at those moments when we refute the reduction of the singular to general systems, if we leave our familiarized moral outlooks. In an openness to otherness, our set of prevalent moral judgments can be suspended. The shift from literary experiences to social justice is questionable since, if the negotiation of interests through language entails a desertion of singularity, an impoverishment of the initial experience, how do we disseminate an experience transforming selfhood, disrupting subjectivity?

Responsibility for the other—be it the new transforming the self by defamiliarizing effects of foregrounding, or an actual other making ethical demands—entails an assumption of the other's needs, a readiness to put the own idiosyncratic desires aside, even if this could potentially entail a threat to the self. My cognitive faculties are put at stake, as well as my emotional being and self-concept, to attend to its every need, without any guarantees of personal benefits or rewards. Putting the other before the self amounts to an inherently *asymmetrical* ethics: In Levinas' words, "I must always demand more of myself than of the other. … This essential asymmetry is the very basis of ethics: not only am I more responsible than the other but I am even responsible for everyone else's responsibility" (Kearney 1995, 67).

Here we see again, that ethics as answerability to singularity necessitates an attitude of disinterestedness, an temporal abandoning of selfhood: "it is a form of vigilant passivity to the call of the other which precedes our interest in Being, our *inter-esse* as a being-in-the-world attached to property and appropriating what is other than itself to itself" (*Ibid*.66). Ethical

behavior does not take into consideration rewards or consequences for the self. Conversely, morality administers the realm of sociality, of negotiations between the cohabitants of a certain society, to protect their *interests*. It is therefore highly interested and, ideally, *symmetrical*. "Ethics, as the extreme exposure and sensitivity of one subjectivity to another, becomes morality and hardens its skin as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal 'third' (*tiers*)– the world of government, institutions, tribunals, prisons, schools, committees, etc." (*Ibid.*66). The third implies a transition from inter-subjective relating to social responsibility, or answerability.

Paradoxically, then, ethics as responsibility for otherness necessitates the adherence to a system in which singularity fades away. For this reason, Derrida takes morality to be a reductionist enterprise that cancels out every option of true responsibility to otherness. This amounts to the ambivalent character of the ethical obligation to the other when brought into relation with our concrete, complex, historical life world, an "ontological world of technological mastery and political self-preservation" (Kearney 1995, 64). As the perspective of Henry Perowne in *Saturday* illustrates, a fundamental insecurity arises from the knowledge that there are always numerous obligations to countless others, and that these are often in conflict. Levinas explicitly links the emergence of the 'third person' to a loss of the singular character of relating, and a concurrent resort to the realm of accountability:

> because there are more than two people in the world, we invariably pass from the ethical perspective of alterity to the ontological perspective of totality. There are always at least three persons. This means that we are obliged to ask who is the other, to try to objectively *define the indefinable*, to *compare the incomparable* in an effort to juridically hold different positions together. (Kearney 1995, 57, emphasis mine)

This necessitates a move from singularity and asymmetry to equality or symmetry in an effort to create a balance between claims that contradict each other. Were there only two people in the world, Levinas asserts, a judicial systems would be superfluous since one could continuously retain a responsible attitude toward the other. The moment we add a third person, the ethical relating to the other begets a political character of negotiation, and thus "enters into the totalizing discourse of ontology" (Kearney 1995, 57-8). The paradox this obligation invokes is the same as the paradox of the language system we have to enter in order to guard the interests of the other in the communal sphere: to serve the other, we need to resort to means that evaporate our singularity.

The highly undecidable character of a response to otherness stems from another factor as well, namely the inherent limitlessness of responsibility: it does not restrict itself, as the protagonist of *Saturday* would have preferred, to your family, friends and colleagues: it envelops strangers, fish, terrorists and even the inanimate world and is therefore radically undecided. And all these responsibilities are absolute and immediate in their demands (Derrida 2000, 62). In this respect, Levinas cites Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, asserting that the burden of responsibility means that "[e]ach of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others" (Levinas 1997, 146). While attending to the other's needs, there are always innumerable faceless others to whom I should relate in the same way, and this means sacrifice, as Derrida explains: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*], every one else is completely or wholly other" (Derrida 2000, 68). This gives the concept of responsibility an a priori character of *scandal*. Responsibility is thus tainted by an inevitable *ir*responsibility: "How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant?" (*Ibid*.71). Derrida's remark that "[e]very other is wholly other" points to the inaccessibility and the resistance to totality of the other: this element of the scandal in an ethics of responsibility prevents it from becoming habitualized or programmatic.

In the contemporary setting of *Saturday* and *On beauty*, a world in which, as Perowne muses, it is impossible to remain innocent and ignorant to the demands made by millions of others all over the world (an impossibility emphasized and intensified by the global media and the multicultural city), a world, moreover, in which the family is no longer as a rule the impenetrable unity of love and harmony it was in Forster's days, this paradoxical character of responsibility only adds to a general insecurity and unease. In complex, global moral conflicts—and 9/11 seems to be employed as a metonym for these—an ethics of singularity does not offer clear-cut solutions. And even if one is able to answer to otherness, achieves an openness to its 'cutting through' worn-off perspectives, when one enters the realm of public decision-making, of judgment and communication, who is to say what to do? In both novels, these problems of ethical response are acknowledged. Whereas *Saturday* ended with what I have interpreted as a retreat, a closing-off to the imminent 'threat' posed by otherness, the ending of *On Beauty* is diametrically opposed to this.

5.4 Strangers to Ourselves: Habitualization as Blindness to Singularity in *On Beauty*

In the 'acknowledgements' section, Zadie Smith emphatically mentions *On Beauty* to be "inspired by a love of E.M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other ... This time I wanted to repay the debt with *hommage*" (*OB* 1).[60] Smith's novel is commonly known to be a modern re-writing of the latter's 1910 novel *Howard's End*, the motto of which, "Only connect", she replaces with a line by her husband, the poet Nick Laird: "*There is such a shelter in each other*" (*OB* 93). Smith's admiration for E.M. Forster is elucidated in an essay titled "Love, Actually," in which she elucidates some of her ideas on the literary novel.

What grants Forster's unique status as an author in Smith's view, she sets out to explain here, is that his moral stance towards his characters is devoid of judgment. This goes beyond what is regarded here as the prevailing model for morality in the novel until Forster's time, as exemplified by Jane Austen, who "wears her ethics of reading on her sleeve and in her titles" (Smith 2003, 8)—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*: Austen had what Smith designates as a form of 'tolerance' for her characters, despite their moral errors. Smith describes a positivist stance, aimed at a clear, objective mapping of psychology. E.M. Forster deviated from this path by "widen[ing] the net of his empathy to include people so muddled they barely know their own name" (*Ibid*.16). The important realization flowing from this move of increased obscurity that Smith has come to value so much, is that *pace* Austen, "there might be some ethical advantage in not always pursuing a perfect and unyielding rationality" (*Ibid*.). Instead of serving epistemological or psychological goals, allowing us to

[60] A second important source of inspiration is Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, from which Smith borrow more than just the title. In situating her novel in the fictional college town Wellington, and choosing a protagonist that is a fervent advocate of radical theories, Smith hyperbolically sketches the academic *status quo* that Scarry sought to counter: the banishing of the conversation on beautiful things from universities. The section from Scarry's text that Smith uses as one of her epigraphs reads: "To misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed" (*OB* 127). For Scarry, beauty leads to creation, a desire to make new beautiful things and "locate what is true". Therefore, "beauty is a starting place for education" (Scarry 1999, 31). A neglect of this form of cognition weakens our ability for ethical relations. This idea obviously informs the plot of *On Beauty*; however, the novel moves beyond Scarry's account of aesthetics in multiple respects: the experience is democratized, personalized and modernized, this avoiding the tendency towards universalizing. In this, steps are taken towards bridging the gap between Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps, and the gap between the opponents in the debate outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I want to focus on the 'cutting through' of familiarized perspectives by singular experiences of otherness instead.

know the world and the other's mind in the fullest detail attainable, the novel in this view reminds us that "there are some goods in the world that cannot be purely pursued rationally, we must also feel our way through them" (*Ibid*.18). It teaches us something about the inaccessibility, incoherence, changeability and uncertainty of our own consciousness. Smith insists that humans are not like Austen protagonists in this respect, we are not always capable to attain a full and lucid self-understanding. Instead of giving a complete overview of the minds and motivations of others as moral exemplars, novels teach us to "car[e] about people who are various, muddled, uncertain and *not quite like us* (and this is good)" (*Ibid*.25, emphasis mine). She links this to John Keats' concept of 'negative capability': "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason .." (quoted in *Ibid*.20). This is a vital ethical recognition, she claims, for it teaches us that most people are not only unlike characters in a realist novel when it comes to self-understanding: most of the time, we do not even *want* to be like them, would "rather not understand ourselves, because it is easier and less dangerous" (*Ibid*.22). As surprising a statement this seems to be, coming from a writer who remains firmly in the tradition of realist narrative, Smith seems to keep to it. Moreover, it is very much in line with the form of asymmetrical ethics lined out in this chapter, as I will show.

In a lighthearted, humorist tone, *On Beauty* paints the struggles of a whole array of different characters, embarking upon the difficult quest of construing a solid identity. In this process, they all to some extent reveal a tendency to close themselves off to otherness, often in the quest of belonging to a certain group—a university, a subculture, a family. These groups do not particularly stand out for their hospitality[61]; these characters, consequently, rather buttress their own self-image (much like Perowne in *Saturday* buttressed his beautiful house) by incorporating the other, appropriating it while adhering to their respective frames of thought, fixed sets of ideas and ideologies. As grave as this sounds, in *On Beauty*, this is shown to be the order of the day: the novel is, amongst other things a catalogue of illustrations of the fact that it "seems normal for people to reduce the complexity of what they are feeling

[61] Derridean hospitality always entails a possible threat—the outcomes of opening up to otherness are highly incalculable—and is in this sense analogous to hospitality in the average meaning of the word, as made manifest in this novel. Communities, just like the individual consciousness, have to be protectively closed off. Thus, Carl is denied entrance to the Belsey's anniversary party, Jerome nor the daughter-in-law of the Kippses is really invited into their family, Carl does not 'belong' at university. On the other hand, affirmative action and tenure ("the final, generous institution to take [Howard] in its dotage and protect him" – *OB* 438) are forms of hospitality that do occur in the novel.

and thinking, and to close down the awareness of what lies outside their immediate experience" (Sontag 2004a, 227). However, these fantasies of the self are more than once interspersed by emergent otherness violating the schemes of automatization.

Openness to the transforming powers of aesthetics and a selfless ethical attitude towards the other, then, are presented here as a very complicated enterprise—and not just for the somewhat exaggeratedly juxtaposed figures of the conservative and the deconstructionist. The urge to possess, to incorporate and appropriate, here by far transcends the application to beautiful art and beautiful people: despite its title, *On Beauty* deals with much more than Scarry's essay. Ideas, ideologies, theories, tastes, friends and lovers: all can become habitualized and become a matter of interest to what Levinas would call our 'self-centered' ontologies. This is done out of fear, not maliciousness—we all desire to protect ourselves from the complexities and obscurities of the world around us.

We have, for instance, the comical rendition of Zora Belsey, a sophomore at her father's college who fanatically strives to be a young radical academic. Decided on becoming as rigid and serious as her father she has made his disregard for the singularity of art and the other her own. Extremely suspicious of transcendence and essence and ready to deconstruct anything, she prefers a professor lecturing on the *Requiem* on her Discman to the actual happening of the concert. Her mother, musing disconcertedly on Zora's way of living "through footnotes", remembers that "[i]t was the same in Paris: so intent was she upon reading the guide book of Sacré-Coeur that she walked directly into an altar, cutting her forehead open" (*OB* 156).

This closed-off attitude has its ethical ramifications in her relating to street poet Carl. On a first encounter, she is struck by his appearance in an experience entailing self-forgetfulness, which is quite an achievement for this girl:

> ... she stood by the side of the lifeguard's chair and watched the smiling sun make its way through the water, watched the initial seal-pup flip-flop of the boy's torso, the ploughing and lifting of two dark arms in turbine motion, the grinding muscles of the shoulders, the streamlined legs doing what all human legs could do if they only tried a little harder. *For a whole twenty-three seconds the last thing on Zora's mind was herself*. (*OB* 133, emphasis mine).

Temporarily, on seeing him, her self-involved thoughts evaporate in what resembles an experience with a defamiliarizing aftershock: obviously, this beautiful lower-class street boy confuses her. But due to feelings of insecurity and fear, when he starts talking to her

spontaneously and openly, she retreats in the defensive mode: "[s]he imagined to herself that all these questions were a kind of verbal grooming that would later lead – by routes she didn't pause to imagine – to her family home and her mother's jewellery and their safe in the basement" (*OB* 139). Literally speaking, you never know what you invite when you open yourself—or your basement—up to the other, the risk is imminent.

A similar move from what initially seems like a self-transformative experience, yet is followed by highly self-centered behavior, is to be discerned in her father's relation to Victoria, the student he has an affair with: "[l]ooking at her made him feel open to ideas, possibilities, allowances, arguments that two minutes earlier he would have rejected" (*OB* 256). Despite these feelings, he only sees her outer shape, and after having slept with her on the day of her mother's funeral, he cannot get rid of her soon enough.

Even when something startles us out of our occupations with ourselves, out of closed-off awareness, these examples show, it can subsequently become an object to be seized, appropriated, incorporated into the own self-image. Significantly, throughout the novel, characters are compared to works of art[62] which, far from a positive celebration of their beautiful beings, as some critics have interpreted it—for Kathleen Wall, the remark "You should be in a fountain in Rome" (*OB* 121) signifies "a response to Kiki's integrity and ability to communicate" (*OB* 771)—rather seems a metaphor for the ethical failures resulting from a blindness to the other's singularity, a schematization of their external appearance.

Luckily, almost all of these characters have their own sense of goodness as well—on a closer note, however, the ethical deeds that emanate from their intentions are rarely completely without interest.[63] For example, the other mistress of Howard, poet-in-residence Claire Malcolm, who helps underprivileged students, seems to have an infinitely extendable sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others, exclaiming "[w]e have something to do with everywhere" (*OB* 228). In reality, however, she is "only truly excited by the apocalyptic on the world stage: WMD, autocratic presidents, mass death. ... She liked to go on marches

[62] It is Claire who makes the fountain-remark; Howard likens his wife and his daughter to "two of Picasso's chubby water-carriers" (*OB* 12), whereas Carl is compared to one of Rubens' four African heads (*OB* 77). Victoria is said by Claire to "[look] like Nefertiti. Like one of those statuaries on the bottom of the Fitzwilliam, in Cambridge. Such an anciently *wonderful* face" (*OB* 123). When Levi is first addressed by his striking Haitian friend, it is "like an actor breaking the suspended disbelief of the fourth wall" (*OB* 194); in a fight, Kiki and Howard are "like two formal, unrelated, full-length portraits turned so as to face each other" (*OB* 202). In all these cases, the other is treated less than responsibly, its singularity ignored.

[63] The one time Zora belsey comes close, taking the opportunity of *not* arousing a scandal by keeping her knowledge of her father's and Monty Kipps' affairs with two students for herself, she ruins it all by "immensely enjoy[ing]" the "unassailable moral superiority" this lends her (*OB* 439).

and to sign petitions" (*OB* 122). While she can hardly hide her satisfaction with the self-image this provides her, her attention-span to those closer at home is remarkably short, barely allowing her to maintain awareness of the stories of less pressing cases; she "always grew tired of other people's prose narratives" (*OB* 213-14). In reality, her strong opinions on where the world is heading serve to mask her profound uncertainty of where she herself is off to: she "felt one thing and then did another. *She was a stranger to herself*" (*OB* 216; emphasis mine). She seems to have all the answers, yet she starts an affair with Howard without really knowing why.

When Carl, a gifted 'street poet,' is excluded from taking her poetry class because he does not go to college, Claire does an appeal to Zora's ethical responsibility: "I don't mean to get overly dramatic here, but when I think of Carl, I'm thinking of someone who doesn't have a voice and who needs someone like you, who has a very powerful voice, to speak for him" (*OB* 263). Zora eagerly rises to the challenge this entails of being accountable for the other, to answer *for* him. While she succeeds in securing his spot in the class, this is hardly an asymmetrical gesture—reciprocation is anticipated. Zora desperately wants Carl to be attracted to her, and when this does not happen, she holds it against him, feeling he *owes* her, as he eventually realizes: "apparently you wanted to do a little more than *help* me. Apparently you expected some payback. Apparently I had to sleep with yo' skank ass as well" (*OB* 413). While it all started with an experience of otherness that shocked her out of her exclusive focus on herself, Carl becomes an object to be appropriated for her own improvement, without awareness for his needs—as in *On Beauty*, such an answerability keeps tilting over in an involuntary assimilation, domesticating the other while protecting self-sameness.

Then again, these character at least keep trying to uphold some experiential awareness. Generally, non-academics in the novel experience far less trouble relating to people very different from them. It is implied in manifold ways that discussing, for instance, matters of beauty, seems to evaporate the experience: as Kiki phrases it by quoting Elvis Costello, "[w]riting about music is like dancing about architecture" (*OB* 44). This is applicable to Carl's situation: starting out very much like the young Levi Belsey in his enthusiasm about rap music, valuing the creative experience more than any theoretical account of it ("When I be writing I'm like BAM. I hit on the nail, through the wood and out the other side. *Believe*. Talkin'? I hit my own finger. Every time", *OB* 351), when his thinking and discourse on aesthetics undergoes the influence of academic poet Claire Malcolm, this incites him to stop

performing in the local club since the music played there lacks *proportion*. Eventually he stops rapping at all, working in the music library of the Black studies faculty at Wellington instead; significantly, filing and categorizing take precedence over his initial excitement at music—confirming Levi's conviction that "[i]n universities, people forget how to live. Even in the middle of a music library, they had forgotten what music was" (*OB* 407). Even music gets habitualized.

Formulaically, the scholars in *On Beauty* come off the worst when it comes to the reduction of singularities to general, abstract principles. Howard, out of principle and familiarity, does not experience the art he writes about, period. Being, ironically the "only non-myopic member of the family" (*OB* 64), he has seen the Rembrandt paintings he lectures on "so many times he could no longer see [them] at all" *OB* 144). Whereas his wife Kiki "call[s] a rose a rose[,] [h]e call[s] it an accumulation of cultural and biological constructions circulating around the mutually attracting binary poles of nature/artifice" (*OB* 174). An art historian, he should have been sufficiently educated to see, yet ironically, he fails to grasp the beauty and singularity of what is closest to him. His impoverished perception is not restricted to aesthetics, his shortcomings in the ethical realm being more severe: as his student and mistress Vee pointedly condenses his issues for him, "[y]ou just need to deal with the fact that you're not the only person in this world" (*OB* 390). Fully absorbed in his own self-same 'ontology,' indications to the effect that his deconstructionist drive has turned in a ridiculous automatization of his academic ideas abound, suggesting that "[s]omething about academic life had changed love for him, changed its nature (*OB* 225).[64]

His inimicality to values render him the personification of every objection to postmodernism: to 9/11, he delicately responded by sending round an e-mail about a Baudrillard essay on wars that never took place—exactly like critics as quoted in the introduction to this thesis would have expected of a deconstruction-monger. His rigid style of intellectualism, reiterating worn-out ideas while being desensitized to affect, is connected to his failure to relate to his wife, whom habitualization has devoured long ago to a point where he has lost awareness to her singularity. This has an aesthetic dimension as well: Kiki's body has changed considerable during their marriage, and she despairs at his incapacity to see her

[64] His intellectual rigor that is carried through a bit too far, leads Claire to ask "[w]hat *does* Howard like?" (*OB* 54), to which his wife is incapable of replying, whereas his eldest son Jerome calls his rejection of beauty a "denial of *joy*" (*OB* 236).

as the same (thin) person he fell in love with: "I want to be with someone who can still *see* me in here. I'm still *in* here" (*OB* 398). Kiki, on the other hand, very much open to otherness and highly susceptible to affect, cannot *but* see him in his singular being, even when she wants to be utterly repelled by his sheer presence after learning of his unfaithfulness:

> She found she could muster contempt for even his most neutral physical characteristics. … The only thing that threatened to disturb her resolve were the sheer temporal *layers* of Howard as they presented themselves before her: Howard at twenty-two, at thirty, at forty-five and fifty-one; the difficulty of keeping all these other Howards out of her consciousness; the importance of not being side-tracked, of responding only to this most recent Howard, the 57-year old Howard. The liar, the heart-breaker, the emotional fraud. She did not flinch. (*OB* 203)

Unfortunately, Howard is too swept away by the physical beauty of the tiny Claire and the 'dangerous commodity' of the teenage Kipps daughter Victoria, both of whom could not have been any less like Kiki "if [he'd] *scoured* the *earth*" (*OB* 206), to bother to regain a vision of her. Ignoring the in-your-face singularity of Kiki, he prefers the evasive images of these women, objectifications without characteristics: Vee is a concept to him, a fantasy, form without content. Greater than the gap dividing the *language* of him and his wife is the one between their ways of *seeing* each other. To save his marriage, nothing less than a total perceptive transformation is needed.

5.5 The Marks of Living disrupt Ideological Shells: Intimations of Howard's End

The more rare instances in the novel, in which characters do succeed in formulating a singular to otherness, this mostly entails an abandoning of language, an insecurity about actions to take and choices to make.

A poignant example is found in Katie, an art student who, entirely out of fashion at her university, experiences painting emotionally. Rembrandt's *Seated Nude* (*Woman on a Mound*, 1632) is the occasion for an unsettling encounter. At first, the painting, depicting an unaestheticized female figure, "was a shock [to her]—like a starkly lit, unforgiving photograph of oneself" (*OB* 251). Instead of looking away as Katie might have done to seal herself from this image, however, she embarks upon its details, 'refamiliarizing' it in an imaginative, associative way:

> Katie began to notice all the exterior, human information, not explicitly *in* the frame but implied by what we see there. Katie is moved by the crenulated marks of absent stockings on her legs, the muscles in her arms suggestive of manual labour. That loose belly that has known many babies, that still fresh face that has lured men in the past and may yet lure more. (*Ibid*.)

Then she implicates her self, relating it to this personalized perspective, followed by an expansion of the meaning grasped to every woman: "Katie – a stringbean, physically – can even see her own body contained in this body, as if Rembrandt were saying to her, and to all women: 'For you are of the earth, as my nude is, and you will come to this point too, and be blessed if you feel as little shame, as much joy, as she!'" (*Ibid*.). Thus, she achieves an awareness of perceptions that often are excluded in familiarized representations, especially in popular media: "This is what a woman *is*: unadorned, after children and work and age, and experience – *these are the marks of living*" (*OB* 251-52). After the refamiliarizing process, she is amazed at the power of art to reconfigure its materials into something so all-encompassing: "[a]nd all this comes from cross-hatching; … all these intimations of mortality from an inkpot!" (*OB* 252). The woman depicted in the painting is naked and vulnerable, an in a response to her singularity, Katie accounts for her "marks of living", opening up to an acknowledgement of mortality as an ultimate consequence of her otherness.

Another example of responsibility is to be found in the friendship between Carlene Kipps and Kiki Belsey. While their husbands fiercely engage in a polemics regarding their theoretical principles in public forums, their wives find each other in a parallel but more emotional, intimate response to beauty and everything that matters to them.[65] After their first acquaintance, Kiki has a "strong, irrational desire to be in that woman's presence again" (*OB* 165). Somehow they manage to come to a singular relating, a responsibility for the other's otherness without reducing it to sameness. Like their husbands, they have very incongruent ideas about social and political issues—about the equality between the sexes, or a cabdriver without proper English speaking skills. Rather than their opinions and ideologies, they define themselves on the ground of what they perceive, and come to share their perceptions of what

[65] This division of Rational vs. Irrational, Logical vs. Emotional and Public vs. Intimate connected to Men vs. Women, is in itself highly disputable and begs to be deconstructed, although the satirical character of the novel with its all-but-round characters probably renders such an approach superfluous, since the ironical stance towards these gender divisions is already contained in the tone of the novel. Moreover, the scope and goal of this chapter definitely do not allow me for a demonstration of ideology critique–no more than an examination of the formal properties of *On Beauty*'s language is on my agenda.

they find beautiful. This is what makes relating possible: as Carlene Kipps pronounces refreshingly naively, "I don't care what the doctors say: the eyes and the heart are directly connected" (*OB* 268)—for an affective relation, this implies, one only has to *see*.

Where other characters are motivated to forge connections on the basis of their similarities, their sameness, Kiki and Carlene respect each other's otherness. The self-transformative effects that Howard described as an openness to "ideas, possibilities, allowances, arguments that two minutes earlier he would have rejected," here actually leads to deeds, such as an–alas interrupted—spur-of-the-moment outing to the Kippses' country house.

Carlene's remarkable incalculability and spontaneity seem to me to be related from her terminal illness. Well before learning of this, Kiki is struck by the vulnerability of the woman, inciting responsibility: when supporting her, "Kiki felt almost the whole of Carlene's weight shift on to her, and it was nothing at all to bear. Something in Kiki's heart shifted too, towards this woman. She didn't seem to say anything that she didn't mean" (*OB* 96). Kiki seems to instinctively grasp her vulnerability as other dying alone, to be aware of the impossibility of taking her place. Carlene seems to intimate her own end as self-same subject, consequentially knowing no impediments in opening up, ready to put her idiosyncratic needs aside any time.

This singular relating eventually leads her to posthumously leave Kiki her extremely valuable Hector Hyppolite painting (which her children consider their birthright) in a genuine ethical act of asymmetry. The accompanying note reads "It should be loved by someone like you" (*OB* 269). Carlene wants to share her painting with a woman she barely knows, and she wants nothing in return for her hospitality. When the young Levi describes such a singular asymmetrical relating he intuitively touches upon its non-reciprocal character: "sometimes it's like you just meet someone and you just know that you're totally connected. Even if they don't, like, recognize it, you feel it. And in a lot of ways it don't matter if they do or they don't see that for what it is—all you can do is put the feeling out there. That's the deal" (*OB* 304).

The character that has the biggest leap to take in this risky undertaking in Howard. When his affair with Claire Malcolm is discovered, and he proves incapable to withstand the seduction of Victoria Kipps, when his own kids despise him and his wife seems to be resolving to give up their marriage, in short, when Howard hits rock bottom, hope is starting to dawn. From then on, on the brink of losing everything, a gradual transformation of vision is

catalyzed as he gains in vulnerability and becomes less sure of his principles. There appear some cracks in his "hard ideological shell" (*OB* 355). The process of his perceptive transformation, the retrieval of his vision, is traceable through his responses to paintings. First he schematizes them according to long-formed, pre-fixed, unquestioned academic principles that are reductive *ad absurdum*: all representative art is hegemonic, its value conventionally inscribed. This piece of habitualized knowledge comes to substitute for the actual works, devouring them.

This attitude is already slightly altered when he sees *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) for the millionth time, and something is different, seems to shift: "today Howard felt himself cut in the painting's orbit. He could see himself laid out on that very table, his skin white and finished with the world, his arm cut open for students to examine" (*OB* 144). Quite literally, he is opened up through this new perception of the painting, feels a vulnerability while otherness is finally creeping up on him, drawing him into feelings and thoughts he would rather keep at distance. From then on, his familiarized perspectives are disrupted bit by bit, entailing a possibility of renewed awareness, of vision instead of recognition.

When later confronted with Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* which he normally discards as a summit of bourgeois elitism, personal memories associated with the painting obtrude his usual complacency:

> How many times has Howard looked at these men? The first time he was fourteen, being shown a print of the painting in an art class. He had been alarmed and amazed by the way the Staalmeesters seemed to look directly at him, their eyes (as his schoolmaster put it) 'following you around the room,' and yet, when Howard tried to stare back at the men, he was unable to meet any of their eyes directly. Howard looked at the men. The men looked at Howard. On that day, forty-three years ago, he was an uncultured, fiercely bright, dirtykneed, enraged, beautiful, inspired, bloody-minded schoolboy who came from nowhere and nothing and yet was determined not to stay that way - that was the Howard Belsey whom the Staalmeesters saw and judged that day. But what was their judgement now? Howard looked at the men. The men looked at Howard. Howard looked at the men. The men looked at Howard. (*OB* 384-85)

After Kiki has left, he regains touch with this feelings as this vulnerable boy: the work makes him nervous, albeit still in a self-conscious way. Trying to come to terms with this work as if he sees it for the first time, he is permeated with a loss of self-knowledge, comes to realize

how little a sense he has of himself and where he is going. This slowly seems to push him in the direction of an awareness his wife desperately tries to impose on him: "[t]his is real. This is life. We're really here. – this is really happening. Suffering is real. When you hurt people, it's *real*" (*OB* 394), without getting through.

The first major disruption occurs at the funeral of Carlene Kipps, where upon hearing the *Ave Maria* in church (which would normally have provided an occasion of gleeful sarcasm), he finds himself unarmed and breaks down, abandoned by his cynicism. The atmosphere of this event causes an epiphany that reminds him of his finiteness and revives profound feelings of responsibility for his family: "His thoughts fled from him and rushed down their dark holes. Zora's gravestone. Levi's. Jerome's. Everybody's His own. Kiki's. Kiki's. Kiki's. Kiki's" (*OB* 288). The prospect of dying alone is the beginning of an eye-opening process: suddenly he *sees* them again, realizing, in Levinas' words, that "the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness" (Kearney 1995, 60). To expect that these insights would lead to ethically responsible behavior would lead to disappointment, in the confusion caused by these self-challenging experience of knowing less, he commits desperate deeds that only push him further to the abyss, like sleeping with a student. When this finally comes out and his wife has had enough, she leaves, and the university enforces a sabbatical on him. After a gap in the narrative, the reader learns of the changes these consequences have caused in him:

> Howard's forced sabbatical had brought with it a new knowledge of the life cycles of his house. He now noticed which flowers closed themselves when the sun set; he knew the corner of the garden that attracted ladybugs and how many times a day Murdoch [the dog!] needed to relieve himself; he had identified precisely the tree in which the bastard squirrel lived and had considered cutting it down. [He knew what sound the pool made when the filter needed changing, or when the air-conditioning unit needed a thump to its side to quieten it down.] He knew, without looking, which of his children was passing through a room – from their intimate noises, their threads. (*OB* 435)

Not much left to lose, because he already seems to have lost most (his wife, his reputation, security of tenure, the respect of his kids), he once again perceives his surroundings.

Finally, when in the novel's last scene, Howard, up for tenure at last, is about to give a lecture on one of the paintings he has seen a thousand times. Realizing he has left his notes in the car, he suddenly sees it again, as if it were the first time. It is of significance to note that

the work in question is a depiction of Rembrandt's love Hendrickje (*Hendrickje Bathing*, 1654). Displayed on PowerPoint, this picture catches him off-guard at that moment that is pregnant with meaning, his elaborate vocabulary abandons him. He takes it all in: like the otherness lurking at the edges of his consciousness, "[t]he surface of the water was dark, reflective – a cautious bather could not be certain what lurked beneath" (*OB* 442), reflecting a sense of risk. All at once his eye falls on his wife in the audience, and he cannot take it off her: "In her face, his life" (*OB* 442) In what seems like a first singular relating between the two, mediated by vision, he keeps staring, entranced by her: "[h]e looked into the audience once more and saw Kiki only" (*Ibid*.). He sees her as for the first time, in an epiphany binding together all that has gradually come to his awareness, his self-sense disrupted with a shock at a moment in his academic career that would have been the epitome of his self-congratulation. This perceptual transformation is mediated by his refamiliarization of the painting of *Hendrickje* he now enlarges until her flesh fills the wall. He now experientially engages with it: "[t]hough her hands were imprecise blurs, paint heaped upon paint and roiled with the brush, the rest of her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety – chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint of yellow, challenge of facing otherness, thematized as death: the hint of yellow is of extreme significance in this respect, since it to him all that he tried to shield his consciousness to: the prospect of his demise, of Howard's *end*. His eyes are opened, his answers suspended. Less afraid of life and his own mortality, he has stopped chattering. He sees the beauty in 'the marks of living' (*OB* 442-3). His eyes and his heart are connected again, with no interference of brain or mouth. *On Beauty* ends in silence.

Far exceeding the topic its title refers to, *On Beauty* is about opening up, become more aware and regaining a vision of your surroundings and its multiple manifestations of otherness. It is about the risk it entails, the desire to close off to the impenetrable other and the changeable self. The concept of otherness here is almost antithetical to that emanating from McEwan's novel, because here, otherness—of the other, as well as the self—is mostly opaque, and the desire to lucidly map the psyche of other or self, unmasked as a utopia: "action," Murdoch wrote, "cannot always be accompanied by radiant understanding, or by significant and consoling emotions. In the particular world there may be only mourning and the final acceptance of the incomplete" (Murdoch 1959, 220). Coming to terms with this is the ultimate challenge presented here, and the novel refuses to provide guidelines or answers in

this respect. The ending is in no way redemptive, gives us no consolation, new status quo or closure, since it culminates in *silence*. In refusing to pose answers, Smith has warded off fantasy. There is no knowing if Howard's transformative experience lead to a change in ethical behavior: in fact, all characters could easily digress in earlier habits of blindness. This only adds to the intensity of this final moment: where *Saturday* culminates in a retreat, *On Beauty* does the opposite: it ends in a transference, an opening up.

Returning to Smith's praise of Foster, then, we can see how she has made his 'muddled' way of writing her own. While *On Beauty* has been almost unanimously applauded in critical reception, the minor points of critique it received are associated with this 'muddledness' as unanimously: the novel, it is said, "could have benefited from more stringent editing purely in terms of length and narrative movement" (Merritt 2005, 7), the plot is a bit ramshackle at times (Lasdun 2005, 10), narrative situations diffuse (Preston 2005, 7), and the characters too numerous and shadowy at times (De Ronde 2005, 6)—remarkable similar to the bulk of Forster-criticism. This lack of formal and structural unity can be argued, however, to be the price we have to pay for a certain veracity, a refusal of the benign effects of stories that arrive at closure with lucid self-insights and fully self-possessed characters. We are refused consolation to be consoled through symmetrical form: *On Beauty* is as obscure and messy as is humanity.

What we get instead, is an author who grants her attention to characters and situations unconditionally. With a detailed attention to differences Smith has sketched a wide range of characters without applying any judgments, none are *below* her loving attention for their singular ways of being in the world, nor *above* her mockery for their self-involved silliness. She presents a pluriformity of ways of living, aesthetic preferences, personal ethics, and refreshingly, these are *not* revamped into an equilibrium or a coherent totality, but they do co-exist in all their frictions. Here, unlike in Scarry's theory, where beauty leads us to "locate what is true" (Scarry 1999, 31) and McEwan's prose, where poems save lives, aesthetics does not solve our ethical problems. Like Claire, we all at times are strangers to ourselves. Instead of the psychological development that in the realist tradition usually leads to self-insight, *On Beauty*'s Howard awakens to the world, knowing less and less about himself and what he stands for. This is Smith's positive rendition of Keats' negative capability, an incessant questioning that never reaches closure. In keeping with asymmetrical ethics and the

elusiveness and ineffability of the defamiliarizing experience, *On Beauty* ends in apory and silence.

The asymmetry of our relations to otherness serves as the ultimate refutations of any believe that literature can forge equality and justice in the communal realm. At the same time, it points out the unique capability of the defamiliarizing experience of suspending closure, of a renewal of perceptions and a transformation of thinking that refuses to reduce otherness to sameness, differences to symmetry. The openness demanded of us by otherness shocks us into an awareness of the extremely difficult fact that the self, as well as the literary text and the other, can be a stranger.

Conclusion: Regaining Experiential Awareness: Foreclosure of Closure

As some people know now, there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn.

–Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", 1967.

In this thesis I have identified certain nostalgic tendencies in the aesthetic theories of enthusiast of the 'return to beauty'; in their embrace of the alleged beneficial effects of aesthetics on interpersonal relations in society, these critics reduce differences to sameness and refuse to engage with the tradition of theory, and this entails a risk of falling back into unquestioned, liberal humanist assumptions. The desire to impose a formal unity and totality to the aesthetics-ethics relation is traced back to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

The stress on empathy in the ethical criticism of literature, though totally different in topical focus, poses similar problems. Theorized as a vicarious experience of the situations of textual others, I have shown the empathetic enterprise to come down to a projection of the self onto the other in an attempt to 'map' his or her psyche to achieve a full-fledged and lucid understanding. Ultimately, this projection consists in a reduction of otherness to self/sameness. As my reading of *Saturday* has illustrated, this notion of the ethical effects of literature can easily lead to a form of readerly redemption that digresses in fantasy.

Moreover, theorists of ethical criticism, I have argued, have insufficiently accounted for the differences between literature and realist narrative fiction. In order to come to an understanding of the specifically *literary* experience that can lead to a transformation of ethical outlooks on the world, an attention to style has proved vital. However, I have shown stylistic and formal elements to be inseparable from content and meaning. In this respect I have located a friction between artfulness and textfulness; it is this tension that allows for a distinctly literary experience or mode of reading.

This experience was then described as defamiliarizing, catalyzed by the 'making strange' of literature through stylistic devices, followed by a refamiliarization: it transforms the reader's perception, ways of thinking and feeling, and due to the highly personal feelings evoked, the self-concept is possibly modified in this process as well. It can cause us to perceive what has been worn-out or habitualized by over-familiarization, in a continuous process of renewing perception, which makes us return to the world after reading with a

renewed awareness. In this highly personal experiences, differences between readers matter as much as what they have in common, due to the role of personal feelings in coming to terms with the strange text. Moreover, an open attitude is needed to meet this unsettling endeavor.

Through defamiliarization, I have shown, it is possible to conceptualize a link between literature and ethics that is characterized by asymmetry, risk and singularity. The impossibility of instrumentalizing the singular relation between self and other that this entails, makes it un-programmatic and unpredictable: because the singularity of the defamiliarizing experience evaporates when transposed to the communal realm of generalization, its ethical effects could never forge more 'just' or symmetrical relations in society. A reading of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* has enabled me to render this insight more vividly, explaining how self and other cannot be mapped and understood in a lucid, penetrative way: as one of its most extreme implications, otherness makes us strangers to ourselves.

More broadly, this thesis has attempted to show that it is important at any time, however turbulent, to be wary of all postulations of the merits of literature as universal and humanizing, regardless of differences between readers. However innocent an appeal to love and compassion might seem, we have seen that it can lead to an implicit acknowledgement of others being 'less human' when they do not subscribe to these 'universal' (Western) values. Therefore I deem it better to refrain from programmatic propositions of the type of 'literature makes us better judges' or 'when we really imagine what it is like to be an other, we cannot do harm'.

Secondly, it can be seen as a fairly self-centered exercise, departing from a fixed sense of the own identity, to which the other is reduced.

A third argument against this type of literary morality, is its transference from literature to reality: literary style goes against straightforward judgments of characters and situations, by rendering its signifieds thoroughly ambiguous. Far removed from 'recognizing abstract virtues and vices' in particular situations, approving or disapproving of acts, or applying moral principles already firmly in place in one's mind, the stylistic deviations of literary language on different levels render it opaque, which goes against the idea of literature as a playground of ethics.

Fourthly, reader response research has shown that empathy (as all kinds of judgments of characters) is an *outcome* of the reading process, rather than an integral part of the experience that is uniquely literary.

And finally, the singularity of the relating between text and reader, and the highly personal character of the feelings evoked in defamiliarization, render the outcome of the experience decidedly unpredictable and ungeneralizable: singularity tends to evaporate when we enter the realm of the communal or the 'third' and communicate the experience in language.

This motivates my claim that these theories can be seen as a way to guard us from the ambiguity of the world. Ethical criticism that revolves around empathy and propagators of the 'return to beauty' who argue that aesthetics invokes more symmetrical social arrangements can be taken as instances of what Levinas has called the idealizing tendency of an ontology that reduces everything to itself (Kearney 1995, 63).

In the real, complex, messy world we live in, situations are not always comprehensible, ethical choices not always as clear-cut as these theorists would have it. Ethics as singular relating stresses this, foregrounds the possibility, the *freedom* if you will, *not* to have persons and situations 'taped'. Defamiliarization goes against the predisposition of the faculty of reason to turn the other into the same. Now we see how ethics can function as a "kind of play within morality, hold[ing] it open, hop[ing] to restrain it from violence or the will to domination, subject[ing] it to a kind of auto-deconstruction" (Gibson 2008, 15)[66]: it critically assesses these habitualized and fixed moral structures as far as they imply fixed, conventionalized and impersonal rules of thought and behavior. This also implies that the ethical effects of literature pose a resistance to finalized, moralistic, linear, consoling narratives that neatly fit the other into pre-made categories, and pose the need for a transformed sense of ethics, a renewed awareness of irreducible difference, complexity, of the singularity of otherness. Instead of leading to an idea of freedom as aiming at a universal order consisting of a pre-existing harmony, as Kant's sublime ultimately did, the freedom of ethics as singular experience means that we have the competence, undefined and indefinable, but endlessly extendable, to open ourselves up to the other, to bring it into being and be transformed in the process—an unpredictable and unsettling effect, perhaps not so different from the mixed feeling of *Achtung* effected by the sublime, painful and invigorating at the same time. The asymmetry of the self-other relation grants the endless extensibility of this process, and precludes any ultimate harmony to be attained. The other will always exist, will never be placed in a totality we can grasp and comprehend. Freedom ultimately lies in the

[66] From *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*, cited in Grabes 2008, 2.

confrontation with the irreconcilably other, in an infinitely extensible chain of opening up, of transformations. Ethical responsibility is the response to this freedom.

The singularity of the relating between a text that makes the world strange, and a reader who is transformed in this process to the point of attaining altered perspectives, cannot possibly lead to just social relating, because of its elusive nature. What the experience of otherness *can* do, is temporarily break open habitualized moral principles, to effectuate an awareness of their arbitrariness, their points of incongruence, their lack of universality. Herein lies literature's unusual ability to transform the way we see the world. The 'refreshed' consciousness attained by defamiliarization can have the positive effect of a fresh, less strict, sense of self and other. The uniqueness of style can give us a sensibility to differences, enabling us to think the self and other as less fixed, more changeable. The political potential this promises has been eagerly debated, for instance by Castiglia and Castronovo who stress the alleged capacity for aesthetics to ground a post-identity collectivity (Castiglia and Castronovo 2004, 427-30). An attractive idea(l): literary language, generating through an awakening of the feelings and play of the imagination a new, inclusive politics of identification which will never become fixed.

However, since we cannot control the feelings caused by defamiliarization, *how* we are finally affected can never be predicted, is specific to the individual reader: "[l]iterature seems to invoke what is individual in the individual" (Miall and Kuiken 1999, 26), the experience is highly personalized. Experiencing style does affect people, but this does not mean that it is an *identifiable* effect that we can map out and count on—it is, in a very literal way, *useless*. The very instant we attempt to appropriate the experience as a means to serve another end (for instance, politics or law) than the experience itself, it will evaporate. The changes derived from it escape every classification: even empirical or psychological research cannot completely demystify the process. That the literary is not to be employed to attain ethical goals of justice or societal equality does not, however, mean that all that is left us is a solipsistic retreat, pulling the blankets over our heads like Perowne in *Saturday*, shutting out the big scary world outside. For it is exactly in this inherent 'foreclosure of closure' that the experience of literature can be of value.

Instead of bringing us new standards or sets of values, then, the literary experience gives us *less* to hold on to, but more to perceive. The disrupting character of defamiliarization undercutting existing schemata might very well be unwelcome in politically complex times,

and far from consoling or redeeming—as Perowne motivated his rejection of literature, "[t]he times are strange enough" (*Sat* 66).

Writing about the literariness of literature in a post-critical time cannot entail a privileging of some distinguishing core of literary language or of aesthetic achievement—to come back to the motto above the introduction to this thesis, literature, Derrida stresses, has *no definition*—but it helps us to ascribe a deserved importance to literary discourse, its dealing with the world, on moving away from it and back, and the transformation it can arouse in its readers. To be answerable to it means an incessant questioning and renegotiation, a willingness to let the certainties and fixations you live by be challenged: it means becoming *less* sure.

The interpretive 'trouble' we go through, sometimes overcoming utter strangeness and threatening feelings of dislocation, might just be the price we have to pay for a clean new outlook on the world. The fact that we have to work for it could even be refreshing in a time when we can reach the whole world at the click of a mouse button. In this respect Haun Saussy reminds us that that "[w]hat is most worth knowing may be what requires the most strenuous and imaginative adaptation from its readers" (Saussy 2006, 26). Through the process of renewing perception, literature is able to defy "the model of obtuseness, of non-understanding, of passive dismay, and the consequent numbing of feeling, offered by our media-disseminated glut of unending stories" (Sontag 2004a, 225). Because the content of the defamiliarizing process is always changing, always a renewal, it can exercise a gripping force that seizes the reader and makes her nervous in this age in which very little, indeed scarcely anything, has retained its power to shock, to destabilize, to resist appropriation and assimilation into a leveled-out plurality of discourses. What we need now, instead of more principles, values, consolations, fantasies and false certainties, is attentive sight and an awareness of perceptual experience: "Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. … What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more" (Sontag 1964, 13).

When Saussy utters a suspicion that "the close reading and paradoxes of traditional literary criticism must have been symptoms of the information-poor communications of the past, when details mattered" (Saussy 2006, 32), this conversely points to a task for literary

criticism now: it should embody a resistance to bite-size chunks of knowledge and information, an awareness of the fact that there are always other ways of thinking.

To account for this more difficult form of 'knowledge' contained in the experience of literature, literary criticism has to keep acknowledging the importance of the style of a work, and its inseparability from signification, referentiality, context and content. Such an approach could for instance entail a scholarly attention turned to the history of perception itself, if we "try to account for the specific types and determinate modes of mystification or of perceptual numbness which the individual work of art is an attempt to dispel" (Jameson 1974, 59). A focus on defamiliarization would be particularly apt for such an enterprise, which would teach us something about what, in a given culture, can*not* be thought or discussed, what lingers on the borders of consciousness ready to break through. Defamiliarization allows for an approach to literary texts that keeps averting them from turning into Shklovsky's dreaded 'graveyard of language, for, in Sontag's words, it "charges the critic with the task of discarding worn-out meanings for fresh ones. It is a mandate to scout for new meanings: *Etonne-moi* (Sontag 1982, xi). To divorce it from formalism and link it to otherness, as I have done, is to conceptualize a way of thinking style as very much embedded in cultural reality. It allows us to discuss literariness, aesthetics and style without being dragged back into discarded liberal humanist discourse and the veiled dangers it entails.

Instead of giving readers the opportunity to meet new friends of whom we discover fully, lucidly and painlessly what they are like inside, who soothe us and distract us from our fears, the truly literary brings us risk, permeates us with no understanding other than the awareness of the changeability of all understanding, the irreducible otherness of the other, and the strangeness of the self. It might not offer clear-cut moral answers in confusing situations, but if we approach it willingly, we will never be put to sleep in self-enclosed fantasies. Instead we will truly see, that the world is indeed strange enough.

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