CHAPTER ONE
Some Dilemmas of an Ethics of Literature

LIESBETH KORTHAALS ALTES

Introduction

What can an ethical approach to literature mean, and how does it relate to the autonomy art and literature have achieved through the nineteenth and twentieth century? The current “ethical turn” goes from fairly straightforward moralism (literature has to represent certain values and attitudes as desirable), through clarificationism (literature, in representing conflicting views on human affairs, triggers a critical reflection on, and a weighing of, values), to an ethics of/in literature as a radical deconstruction of morality itself. This essay discusses mainly two approaches: relying on an Aristotelian notion of ethics, Martha Nussbaum defends the moral function of literature, which not only fosters flexibility and pluralism but also positively teaches “how to live the good life”; quite differently, on the basis of a poststructuralist *bricolage* combining Levinas, Derrida, Lyotard, Blanchot, and feminist ethics, Andrew Gibson reads literature precisely for the ethical experience of radical undecidability it offers. However deep the differences, both approaches run the risk of reducing literature to a preset idea about what ethics actually is: by locating literature’s ethical dimension either (exclusively) in the familiarization of the strange and clear moral guidance, or (as exclusively) in the experience of strangeness, of absence of meaning, and the evanescence of the self. Ethical criticism, in my view, needs to address precisely the dialectical tension between the two, and ponder the different ethical functions literature can have, for different readers in different contexts.
Les oeuvres d’art ne valent rien comme réponses au nihilisme, elles valent tout comme questions posées au néant.

[Works of art are of no worth as answers to nihilism, they are worth everything as questions to nothingness.]


Is it “time to go back to Leavis,” that is, to a moral commitment in literary criticism? This is how Andrew Gibson provocingly opens his reflection in *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, of course before insisting on all that separates his own “ethical” from Leavis’ “moral” reading of literature. Since the 1980s, the question seems to have acquired new relevance, with the ethical turn in literary studies. After the initial and seminal publications of that period, ethical criticism has gained momentum in the 1990s. The ongoing discussion on the legitimization of the humanities, and of literary studies in particular, in postmodern multicultural societies, confers a sense of urgency and relevance to the reflection on the ethical function of literature and the arts. But what can an ethical approach to literature mean, and how does it relate to other functions of, and approaches to, literature?

**Art, Morality and Ethics**

The autonomy of the arts with respect to dominant morality, religion, and politics is an important privilege more or less acquired in most democratic societies, which however remains very fragile. As Bourdieu and others have argued, art as an institution became increasingly independent since the eighteenth century. On a philosophical level, Kant’s characterization of the aesthetic as “disinterested” has been deeply influential in the conception of the autonomy of the arts. However, the relationship between art and morality is intricate and hardy. Even a movement like *L’Art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake) can be argued to defend a higher conception of ethics, autonomous in the sense that it is free from bourgeois norms. Moral transgression in art generally presupposes