Introduction: The Ethical Turn Revisited

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In his essay “In Pursuit of Ethics,” the introduction to a 1999 *PMLA* special issue on “Ethics and Literary Study,” Lawrence Buell commented on the ethical turn in the 1990s. Like the dominance of textuality in literary study in the 1970s, and that of historicity in the 1980s, Buell regarded ethics as the “paradigm-defining concept” of the 1990s. Out of the heterogeneity of ethical approaches to literature, he organized the “pluriform discourse” into six strands as follows. Firstly, it was the “legacy of critical traditions that have dwelled on the moral thematics and underlying value commitments of literary texts” (7). A notable practitioner was David Parker, who updated the “Arnoldian-Leavisite conception of literature as ethical reflection” (8). Another representative literary ethicist was Wayne Booth, whose oeuvre “on narrative rhetoric as moral imagination” (8) had been influential in formulating the ethical companionship with fiction. Secondly, it was the philosophical turn toward literature, led by Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, who turned to the novels of especially Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Vladimir Nabokov as “a supplement of moral philosophy” and hence “abetted a revival of a moral or social value-oriented approach to literature” (8). The other two constituents were respectively represented by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. While deconstruction itself had been regarded as an ethics in the deferral and difference of meaning, Derrida was also instrumental in the promotion of Emmanuel Levinas’s postulate regarding “ethics as first philosophy” (qtd. in Buell 9). On the other hand, in *History of Sexuality*, Foucault had turned the “ethics of pleasure” (qtd. in Buell 9) into a technology of self. Thus, the Foucaultian “care of self” became an ethical project. Fifthly, it was the postcolonial discourse led by Gayatri Spivak, who asserted that “ethics is the experience of the impossible” (qtd. 1

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1 See David Parker, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*.  
2 See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *The Company We Keep*.  
3 See Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* and *Poetic Justice*; and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. 
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in Buell 9). According to Spivak, the commitment to the “ethical singularity with the subaltern” was the hallmark of postcolonial ethics. Lastly, it was the constitution of professional ethics concerning the standards of academic conduct, such as hiring, teaching, promotion, etc. in the fields of literary and cultural studies.

Almost thirty years have gone by since Buell’s review was published in the PMLA special issue. In the course of those thirty years, critical interest in “literary-ethical inquiry” has witnessed a resurgent groundswell in publications. A cursory Google search finds numerous titles—such as The Turn to Ethics (2000), Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory, co-edited by Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (2001), The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics through Literature by Peter Singer (2005); Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues by Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie (2011); Ethics and Affects in the Fiction of Alice Munro by Amelia DeFalco and Lorraine York (2018); History of Ethics by Daniel Star (2019); and most notably, Ethics and Literary Practice, edited by Adam Zachary Newton (2020). They carry on the “literature-and-ethics conversation” that Buell had addressed thirty years ago. This special issue of Concentric is interested to revisit the ethical turn and we are delighted to include five essays that deal with the literary-ethical dialogue from a wide variety of historical and critical approaches.

Wolfgang Müller in his essay, “A Comparative Analysis of William Godwin’s Philosophical Treatise An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793) and His Novel Things as They Are, Or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794): Including Reflections on the Relations among Philosophy, Ethics, and Literature,” tries to define the question by revisiting the difference between literature and philosophy. Müller is interested in the “respective forms of philosophical and literary discourse” (64) in the works of William Godwin (1756-1836), who, in response to the French Revolution, wrote in consecutive years the two books that reflected on the issue of political justice. After careful and meticulous comparisons, Müller makes the conclusion: “What ethics in philosophy and ethics in literature share is their awareness of the problematic nature of ethical issues, which philosophy addresses by theoretical reflection and literature by artistic representation” (83). It is also interesting to note that among critics, Müller seems to be most impressed with the work of Martha Nussbaum, who “prefer[s] the vividness and appeal of examples in fiction to the abstraction of philosophers’ examples” (83). According to Nussbaum,

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4 Buell made similar observations in his “What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics,” an essay included in the collection The Turn to Ethics, co-edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca Walkowitz (2000).
“Schematic philosophers’ examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy of good fiction” (Love’s Knowledge 46; qtd. in Müller 83). For our purpose, it is important to highlight the difference between ethics and moral philosophy, as Müller comments that “ethics critically investigates the problematic nature of moral terms and concepts” (83) and that there is a high “affinity of literature with ethics rather than [with] moral philosophy” (84).

If Müller is interested in the differences between philosophy and literature, Woosung Kang conducts a similar pursuit in his essay, “Bartleby and the Abyss of Potentiality.” Kang in his reading literally demonstrates how he would, like Nussbaum, prefer Bartleby as a narrative fiction to Bartleby as an abstract example of Agamben’s idea of potentiality. He argues that critics like Agamben have over-read the philosophy in Bartleby at the expense of the literature of Bartleby. While Kang does not disagree with Agamben’s philosophical reading of Bartleby as a “persona of ‘perfect potentiality’” who tries to “de-create, with his passive inaction and non-thinking, the time-old image of thought so as to resist all positive acts of production” (Kang 44), he at the same time posits the question whether the Bartleby “overly ‘potentialized’” by Agamben and the Bartleby “narrativized” by Melville are the same (45). By paying attention to Melville’s narrative strategy, Kang argues that Bartleby writes the syuzhet of the lawyer-narrator under the disguise of the fabula of the scrivener. Moreover, he shifts the attention from the enigmatic silence of Bartleby to the powerlessness of the lawyer-narrator. Kang argues that no less problematic than the scrivener is the lawyer-narrator, whose narrative strategy of “affective otherization” consummates the alterity of Bartleby. Most importantly, Kang regards it as an “ethical dilemma”—“for the sake of the lawyer’s ethical conscience, Bartleby must remain sentimentalized and pathologized as the tragic victim of incurable mental disorder” (54). That is to say, no less disquieted or pathologized than Bartleby, the lawyer-narrator is “to be represented as the one who is driven to passive resistance by unfathomable otherness” (54). Kang’s reading that “Bartleby’s otherness is ethically domesticated as the victim of the lawyer’s ‘innate disorder’” (54) thus seems to reinforce the ethical power of narrativity that both Müller and Nussbaum have observed.

The “literature-and-ethics conversation” gets more entangled in the case of Lebanese American writer Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) due to his family background in the Maronite Church. In his essay “Modernity and Prophetic Speech: The Ethical as the Impossible in the Post-Religious Vision of Kahlil Gibran,” Ghazouane Arslane revisits the literary-ethical dialogue in terms of Gibran’s reinvention of
“prophetic speech” in the dawn of the last century. Arslane places Gibran in the context of the post-Nietzschean denunciation of the Christian deity. In the absence of God, Arslane argues that Gibran is engaged with the “prophetic mode of speech as a modern literary trope . . . that bears the indelible stamp of the Abrahamic” (12). Arslane’s innovation lies in his “looking at Gibran’s literary enterprise as a post-religious attempt to re-invent the religious in a modern context” (14), thus revealing “how the Gibranian poet speaks as a post-religious, post-Nietzschean prophet who reclaims and re-activates the Abrahamic, pre-institutional force of religion as disruption, migration, and event” (14). It is most important to note that this modern Gibranian poet-prophet evokes an “ethical horizon” of what Fethi Meskini regards as “an ‘alter-modernity’ that consists in the radical possibility of an alternative experience of modernity” (Arslane 15). That is to say, Arslane reads Gibranian/Abrahamic poetic prophecy as an “ethical gesture” that unsettles the “a priori culturalist or identitarian approach that veils [Gibran’s writings]” (15). Arslane therefore opens up anew an alternative approach to the Gibranian “literary-ethical dialogue” in terms of post-religious Abrahamic prophecy.

The turmoil that Gibran experienced as a dislocated Maronite could be related to the experience of dispossession of the Australian Indigenous people. Labao Wang, in his essay “White Story and Black Pains in Gail Jones’s Sorry,” revisits the “literary-ethical dialogue” in Jones’s postmodern novel Sorry (2007). Alluding to former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s “2008 apology for the White Australian government’s Stolen Generations policy” (116), Wang argues that Sorry, written and published before the Prime Minister’s statement of “national reconciliation,” should be read as a “postmodern petit récit that tackles a big issue in a small way” (115). He contends that “instead of claiming authority as a grand national narrative” (115), the “big issue” of “black pain” is mediated “indirectly through a highly-twisted postmodern story of a white family tragedy” (118). Narrated through the daughter Perdita, Sorry concerns on the outside the “small tragedy” of the loveless marriage between Stella and Nicholas Keene (Perdita’s parents), and on the inside the unsaid “sorry” to Perdita’s Aboriginal nanny Mary, who is sent to prison for the murder of Nicholas, who was in actuality killed by Perdita. The title of the novel, “sorry,” is then a symbol of the national atonement to the Indigenous people, but it is announced in a whisper. What is most noteworthy is Wang’s reading of “a deliberate form of ‘shadow-speaking’” in the hushed narrative wisps in episodes 1, 10, 13, and 18, where Perdita narrates the primal scene of patricide in fragmentation. Most importantly, Wang argues that narrative art in the “postmodern petit récit” demands the attention of a form of “communication ethics that requires listening to
and caring for the other” (115). While on the surface “the story of the Aboriginal life remains minimal in much of *Sorry*” (Wang 122), the “big issue” is however mediated by way of “poetic indirection” (Wang 125-28), the “*petit récit*” that renders possible an “ethics that is unique to ‘otherness-based communication’” (Wang 131), which, according to Wang, Jones’s novel aptly exemplifies.

While the aforementioned essays focus on narrative fiction, Yanqin Tan turns to narrative film. In her essay “The Ethics of Narrative in Film: *The Great Buddha*+ and Its Self-Reflexive Devices,” Tan examines the “space for self-reflexivity and ethical encounter in a Levinasian sense” (89) in a Taiwanese Hitchcockian thriller, *The Great Buddha*+ (2017). By mostly drawing on the Levinasian “ethical philosophy of infinite otherness” (Tan 89), Tan aims to connect ethical philosophy with filmic studies and to “delineate a possible turn to a ‘non-activist’ ethics” (91) practiced by director Hsin-yao Huang. In her review of ethical philosophy, Tan repeats many points highlighted by Buell in his *PMLA* essay. She points out the importance of Levinasian “relational ethics” (90-93). According to Tan, Levinasian ethics enables us to “[bypass] the rigidness of moral philosophy” and to “[sidestep] the potential risk of subjugating ethics to politics” (92). Most importantly, Tan seems to detect a Bartleby-like “non-activist” ethics in Huang’s shooting of “a phantom-like figure Sugar Apple” in the film (106). Like Bartleby, Sugar Apple is reticent and silent most of the screen time. Tan argues that his “[r]emaining unknown/unknowable and untranslated/untranslatable” is a “self-distancing act of leaving the other as other, [thus] establishing an ethical relation with the figure, in which the self is always welcoming the other but never reaching an end” (107). Moreover, Tan theorizes this “non-activist” ethics in terms of Kristin Thompson’s notion of “cinematic excess,” which “denotes a space of unfamiliar, unclear, and unknown/unknowable” (110). Tan concludes,

> It grants the pseudo-thriller film a rich layer of documentary sensibility and ethical responsibility, which shows considerable respect to the alterity, irreducibility, and infinity of the filmed subjects’ otherness, and in this sense puts into practice what Levinas calls ethics. (110)

In other words, despite its many generic similarities to the Hitchcockian thriller *Rear Window* (1956), *The Great Buddha*+ subverts the genre classic by turning the

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5 The movie was directed by Hsin-yao Huang, a well-established documentary filmmaker in Taiwan.
thriller into a crossover between a feature film and a documentary.

While critical interest in the relationship between ethics and literature continues to thrive, the literary-and-ethical dialogue has recently turned a new leaf in China. Led by Zhenzhao Nie of Zhejiang University, the newly emergent discourse of “ethical literary criticism” deserves a critical study. Since its inception in 2004, the Chinese counterpart of the ethical turn led by Nie and his cohorts has undergone a rapid development. According to Nie, ethical literary criticism posits that “the primary purpose of literature is . . . to offer moral examples for human beings to follow, to enrich their material and spiritual life with moral guidance, and to achieve their self-perfection with moral experience” (88). Among the six strands mapped by Buell, Nie’s theory is perhaps closest to the moral-philosophical turn to literature that has been advocated by Nussbaum and Rorty. By highlighting the dilemma of the ethical environment, Nie zooms in on the various factors of ethical contingency, in which a character would have to make an ethical choice—as in the cases of Antigone, Hamlet, Isabel Archer, Bigger Thomas, Beloved, and by extension as in those of Caleb Williams in Caleb Williams, the lawyer-narrator in Bartleby, the Abrahamic poet-prophet in The Prophet, the white girl Perdita in Sorry, and the self-reflexive director Hsin-yao Huang in The Great Buddha+, among others. As each of the scenarios “tells a view of life,” we seem to hear the echoes of Nussbaum:

> [t]he telling itself—the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader’s sense of life—all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life’s relations and connections. (Love’s Knowledge 5)

While Nussbaum is laudable in her passion for literature (as Müller has pointed out), she seems to anticipate what Adam Zachary Newton and others regard as “narrative ethics”—the representational ethics that turns life to stories.

We thus come to the conclusion that it is poets, storytellers, and narrative artists in both literature and cinema who provide a space for “narrative ethics” to

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6 For details, see Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism by Nie.

7 Müller also points out Nussbaum’s setback—how she remains somehow a “didactic” moral philosopher (78).

8 Since the publication of Newton’s award-winning book in 1997, the concept and criticism of “narrative ethics” has become a major school in ethical criticism.
provoke anew “the ‘emergent’ that ‘persistently and repeatedly undermine[s] and undo[es] the definitive tendency of the dominant’” (qtd. in Arslane 15). As Newton puts it in his preface to the 2020 publication of *Ethics and Literary Practice* (a wonderful echo to the *PMLA* special issue *Ethics and Literary Study*), the title of the collection “names an inquiry that remains productively open to question” (“Preface” ix). Almost 30 years after the publication of *Narrative Ethics*, Newton seems to come to a new realization that “in an ethically counter-reading spirit, we might begin by reading the text against itself” (“Introduction” 4). He observes, “While literary reading may well aspire to the adventurous (a word, incidentally, that Levinas connects directly with the ethical) and even [the] disobedient, it can also open a space for precarity and the unforeseen” (“Introduction” 7; emphases in original). Likewise, the special issue of “The Ethical Turn Revisited” is interested to “explore intersections between [literature and ethics] as provocations rather than givens within a range of fields, heuristic frames, analytical categories, and discourses” (Newton, “Preface” ix). While the essays included in this special issue cover a wide range of authors and issues—from William Godwin and Herman Melville to Kahlil Gibran, Gail Jones, and Hsin-yao Huang—they demonstrate “reading as othering” of both familiar and emergent narratives toward, in Newton’s words, “a space for precarity and the unforeseen” (“Introduction” 7). Moreover, they seem to suggest partial answers to the question posed by him: “What is ‘the ethical turn’ in literary questioning turning from or towards or around or against, as overseen by modulations in the last thirty years or so of humanities research?” (“Preface” x; emphases in original). Accordingly, we invite you to stay tuned and listen to the “literature-and-ethics conversation” in the following pages.

**Works Cited**


Newton, Adam Zachary. “Preface to ‘Ethics and Literary Practice.’” *Ethics and

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9 This is a quotation Arslane cites from Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline* (2003), in which Spivak argues for the self-transformation of the field of comparative literature (100).

10 It nicely echoes the *PMLA* special issue, *Ethics and Literary Study*, edited by Buell, which we referred to in the beginning of the introduction.
About the Author

Iping Liang is Professor of English and American Studies at National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan. She publishes in the areas of Archipelagic American Studies, Critical Plant Studies, Native American Literature, and Asian American Literature in both English and Chinese, including Mushroom Clouds: Ecocritical Approaches to Militarization and the Environment in East Asia (2021; co-editor), I’m Migrant: New Perspective on Overseas Chinese Studies (2018; co-editor), Asia/ Americas: Asian American Literature in Taiwan (2013; editor), and Ghost Dances: Toward a Native American Gothic (2006; author). She is currently the president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, Taiwan (ASLE-Taiwan), while she also serves on the Editorial Board of Translocal Chinese: East Asian Perspectives (2018-21) and on the Advisory Board of the International Society for the Studies of Chinese Overseas (2019-22). With Brian Roberts, Hester Blum, and Mary Eyring, she co-edited a special issue, “Archipelagos, Oceans, and American Visuality,” for the Journal of Transnational American Studies (UC Santa Barbara, 2019). Her current research project, funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology (Taiwan), investigates the island borders in the nineteenth-century US national imaginary across Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines.