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The Ethics of Criticism

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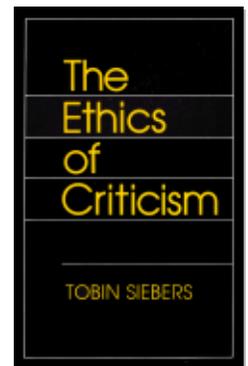
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The Character of Criticism: Introduction

The character of criticism emerges in its critical choices, and the nature of critical choice reveals that literary criticism is inextricably linked to ethics. The ethics of criticism involves critics in the process of making decisions and of studying how these choices affect the lives of fellow critics, writers, students, and readers as well as our ways of defining literature and human nature. To criticize in conjunction with ethics places literary criticism at large. Its environment is no longer exclusively textual, nor is it wholly political, for politics and ethics, although related, do not reflect the same ends. To criticize ethically brings the critic into a special field of action: the field of human conduct and belief concerning the human.

It is important, then, that *The Ethics of Criticism* be understood in this particular light. *The Ethics of Criticism* does not refer to "the ethics of reading" and the idea that a linguistic imperative requires critics not to make decisions between the possible meanings of literary works.¹ Such theories are inherently un-

1. See, for example, J. Hillis Miller, "The Ethics of Reading: Vast Gaps and Parting Hours," in *American Criticism in the Poststructuralist Age*, ed. Ira Konigsberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), pp. 19-41, "How Deconstruction Works," *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 9, 1986: 25, and, more recently, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

critical, if criticism necessitates choice, although no less ethical than others, as we shall see, because their indecision has an ethical motivation. Nor does the ethics of criticism refer to the work, largely admirable, being done currently on literature by moral philosophers. *The Ethics of Criticism* focuses rather on the means by which literary criticism affects the relation between literature and human life. Its area of interest does not extend to all literary criticism, but rather emphasizes a particular line of theoretical development that many see as the main path of what is now called critical theory. Each essay collected here contributes to the sense of the whole book by examining how a particular theory or school of literary criticism has justified in an ethical way its theoretical choices. Each essay further considers the impact of theoretical choice on the relation between literature and the lives of human beings.

Possible approaches toward the ethics of criticism would seem extraordinarily varied, but I have tended to emphasize two main issues where ethics and criticism consistently join, and it is these that require introduction and definition. The first issue concerns the role of the human in literature and criticism—what might be called the character of criticism. To assess the character of criticism requires one to study the ethical attitudes behind critical claims as well as the attitudes engendered either consciously or unconsciously by particular theoretical stances. Recent critical theory has, of course, placed in question the idea of the constitutive subject of language by subordinating selfhood to linguistic structure, and this theoretical position makes the study of ethical attitudes difficult, to say the least. Theory of this kind may in fact be said to deprive criticism of its character, and consequently it effects an ethical transformation not only on criticism but on our conceptions of how human beings and literature relate. To what extent, however, does the elimination of the subject lead to an ethical dilemma, and to what extent does the gesture itself rely on ethical formulations?

Michel Foucault's work provides an exemplary case where we may begin to pose and answer such questions. His proclamation of the "death of man," in particular, articulated in the most notorious rhetoric the necessity of abandoning the human for

the linguistic. The critique of the human sciences in *The Order of Things* is an attack less against science than against the human as an explanatory category.² "'Anthropologization' is," in Foucault's mind, "the great internal threat to knowledge in our day" (348). In the place of the human, Foucault wishes to uncover a positive unconscious of knowledge, and he isolates the idea of man as the site of his archaeology. But the archaeological dig reveals less that is positive than Foucault's paradoxical and anxious attitude toward the human, for the human is in Foucault's mind what both justifies and negates itself within a certain history of violence. Foucault therefore works to replace the human with an idea of language in which such justifications and annulments would have a less oppressive effect. It is for this reason that *The Order of Things* ends with the wager that the human face will soon be washed from our shores, leaving in its place only the discursive practices of language. Foucault's announcement of the "death of man" and of the human sciences has a precise ethical context. His struggle to eliminate the constitutive subject expresses the ethical wish to end the reign of terror that he associates with human history by turning to language as the only ethical subject; and in this respect Edward Said is correct in calling Foucault's theories "an ethics of language."³

Foucault's linguistic ethics, then, relies on a specific theory of

2. References to Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), are given parenthetically. See also "The Discourse on Language," in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 215–237, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1965), *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), and "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38.

3. Edward Said, "An Ethics of Language," *Diacritics* 4.2 (1974): 28–37. Said notes Foucault's allegiance to visionaries and madmen who remain exterior to repressive discursive practices, remarking his belief in the heroism of "their willingness to accept the terrifying freedom that comes from hyper-individuality" (36). Said also stresses Foucault's attention to the relation between language and judgment, that "an existing system of signs is a judgment already made that those particular signs *shall be*." "In this insistence," Said believes, "upon a judgment made both to exclude and include, Foucault therefore describes language *ethically*, in the literal sense" (35).

human character, and this theory motivates his attack on the human sciences. At the heart of *The Order of Things* is the belief that the explorations of the human sciences derive from the human urge for colonization. Foucault does not seem to believe, at first, that “the colonizing situation is indispensable to ethnology: neither hypnosis, nor the patient’s alienation within the fantasmatic character of the doctor, is constitutive of psychoanalysis. . .” (377). But he concludes that, just as psychoanalysis “can be deployed only in the *calm violence* of a particular relationship and the transference it produces, so ethnology can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty—always restrained, but always present—of European thought and the relation that can bring it face to face with all other cultures as well as with itself” (377; my emphasis). What is most proper to the human sciences, in short, is the desire to repress and oppress other human beings. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault refers to this desire as creating the “structure of exclusion” on which Western history rests, and in “The Discourse on Language,” he argues that constraints on the proliferating meanings of language as well as the constraints of language are a kind of violence. Finally, Foucault’s famous attack on the idea of authorship makes sense only as a defensive measure against human character. Foucault believes that authority is oppressive, and he fights the aggressive authority of the author by reducing it to an author-function, that is, a discursive practice in which no human being holds power. Indeed, Foucault’s theory of power is more of an ethical wish than a theory: ideally, no human being should be in power, and Foucault expresses this hope by defining power as that which cannot be possessed.

The image of the tide ebbing away with the human icon remains provocative, but tells finally of what can only be called a premature burial. Theories of this kind have tended to fail, as Foucault’s subsequent shift to a theory of the ethico-poetic self implies, and their supporters are usually the first to speak of the general failures of theory, when perhaps it is only one kind of theory that is destined not to succeed. The replacement of the human by the linguistic turns out to be a self-defeating gesture in every sense. For the human subject always returns in the act

of writing, and to attempt its suppression in writing is ultimately an act of self-violence. Indeed, the violence directed against the concept of the self by modern theorists seems only one more version of the violence associated with human endeavors throughout history. Although critics often justify the importance of language as a means of eliminating the aggressive authority of the human subject and its history of crime, they cannot escape this same history, and they end by erecting the edifice of language on the tomb of the human self. The human face, as it were, must be washed away to make way for language. Georg Lukács's concept of "reification" explains how the modes of production in capitalism gradually strip away all signs of the human from our lives, but one is tempted to apply his idea in a noneconomic way to modern literary theory. Modern critics have fallen prey to a form of reification in their preference for language over the human: every day the idea of the human grows fainter and more distant even as theories of language become more fragmented. Modern theory consequently enacts a maddening gesture doomed to repeat the crimes that it despises the most: killing the concept of the self because the self may kill does not extricate one from the cycle of violence.

And yet the desire to eliminate the constitutive self of literature has ethical motivations that cannot be renounced, no matter how unpopular ethics may become. Whether we assert a theory of the self or deny it, we remain within the sphere of ethics, if only because the word "ethics" derives from the Greek *ēthos*, or "moral character." The idea of character reveals its double meaning when ethics and literary study converge, for we should understand that literary or critical character always implies an ideal of ethical character. The discipline of ethics remains inextricably fused to the problem of human character, and the response of a particular theory to character is usually the best place to begin an assessment of the ethics of criticism. Foucault's early elimination of the self implies an attempt to master human character, and his later *The Use of Pleasure* expresses this intention explicitly in a definition of character that privileges asceticism and self-mastery. The works of René Girard and Friedrich Nietzsche also reveal their greatest ethical

pertinence on the issue of character. Both writers conceive of human psychology in a way that requires the emergence of a force other than human, Christ or the overman, to provide mankind with a moral direction. The theory of Paul de Man ties the inadequacies of the human self to the nature of linguistic structure, so that language becomes a kind of divinity and death a linguistic predicament. Finally, the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan construct a theory of the self that gives privilege to sexuality in character, but persists in seeing sexuality as an impasse in human relations. In each case, the attempt to resolve the conflicts of human character manifests a particular ethical attitude that requires more scrutiny.

The second issue important for the ethics of criticism has already been implied within the foregoing discussion of the relation between the human and ethics. Literary criticism and ethics also converge in their preoccupation with conflict. By "conflict," we need not think only and always of such phrases as "the conflict of interpretations," although these conflicts always involve human agents and may explode into a form of violence that surpasses the limits of literary criticism. Conflict of interpretations is an inescapable effect within the large field of literary theory, but only rarely do differences in opinion produce ideological attitudes that injure human beings. "Violence" is perhaps a better term than "conflict" to capture the area of concern presently shared by ethics and literary theory because it alone evokes the visceral reaction that provides a key to the stakes at issue. The word "violence" carries the sense of daily life. It evokes fear and pity, courage and sympathy, exposing those emotions that define us most as human beings. This anthropological base is central to an understanding of the ethics of modern criticism because literary theorists today, despite all claims to the contrary, are engaged in a species of argument that has startling implications for the way that we relate to and define the human world. The idea of violence carries the burden of our concern with life, and its associations best focus attention on the issues shared by criticism and ethics.

Certainly much has been made of the word "violence" in its history, and it is an easy word to invoke and to abuse, whether

by victims, villains, or sensationalists. No definition will infringe upon its sensational quality precisely because of the extraordinary relevance of aggression in human affairs, but it is worth introducing a general definition nevertheless. Violence exists whenever human beings harm other human beings. Indeed, the violence most threatening to human beings is human violence. It takes many forms, arising in physical attacks or words and actions that deprive human beings of their humanity. Indeed, one must always speak of the "forms of violence," if violence is not to assume a needlessly monolithic character. The forms of violence compose a register of effects that vary in their immediate impact on human life. But ethical thought, at least since Rousseau, has been most deeply troubled by those forms of violence involving the language of human inequality and difference. Here too I am most concerned with the forms of violence that injure human beings by creating categories or ideas that risk depriving them of rights in political and psychological contexts. I will also try to isolate those moments when literary critics have conflated various ideas of disagreement with the idea of violence. Let there be no mistaking, however, the difficulty of differentiating the forms of violence. The problem of violence cannot be properly defined outside of an anthropological context, and the world of human beings is vertiginously complex. Violence is a human problem. It is never an infernal machine without a driver. It is never without a victim. If it may be called systematic, it is only so because it establishes languages and patterns of behavior that can be repeated by others.

Literary criticism would seem far removed from such matters. Its isolation in the little rooms of academia makes it a tame occupation, and many of the dangers now associated with criticism by those in search of a vicarious thrill would be laughable, given the state of terrorism and brutality in the world, if they were not so misguided. And yet language is one instrument of human violence, and in that respect literary critics have a responsibility not only to supervise their own unjust practices as critics but to think about the ways in which language carries on the work of human prejudice, racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism. Even the most ethically oriented critics must re-

main watchful in this regard. Lévi-Strauss, for example, in the course of making an ethical argument against social injustice, does violence to the Nambikwara by attributing to them an inhumanly noble and innocent nature, and Derrida, countering Lévi-Strauss's mistake, violates him by blaming him for the not-so-noble actions of the Nambikwara's social system. Both Lévi-Strauss and Derrida produce categories—respectively, the innocent native and the instigating anthropologist—that risk stealing the status of human being from their objects. Similarly, the American New Critics counter the prejudices of those biographical critics who believe that “the author is the style” with a vision of poetic autonomy, but they express their vision in a language that creates an analogy between poetic intentions and intentionality in murder, thereby maintaining the same association between psychopathology and poetry held by biographical criticism. Such analogies imply that poets are in essence criminal. Finally, one could mention the tendency of feminist criticism to represent the injustices against women in a form that perpetuates those very injustices and stereotypes, or the new field called nuclear criticism and its tendency to fight the terrors of the nuclear holocaust by reducing violence to a game of rhetoric, but a rhetoric that nevertheless comes back to contaminate the definition of literature with the horrors of war.

The reaction of literary critics to violence needs to be interpreted, first and foremost, as an ethical gesture performed within a human context, and in this context literary and ethical problems cannot be separated, no matter how zealous the claim for the autonomy of literature. Nevertheless, as literary critics, we flee from this human context, and above all others. The majority of critics writing today conceives of the violence involved in literary criticism as a problem in the “conflict of interpretations” or at most in terms of a feeble political idea such as the “politics of literature.” These ideas stretch in the right direction, but their formulations are often so general as to miss the mark. More precisely, I am referring to the tendency in critical circles to view conflicts of interpretation as if they were essentially violent, to the view that equates acts of criticism with those of physical or ideological violence. No idea is more widespread today than the

notion that language is by definition violent and that critical language risks being the most violent of all. This idea needs to be disputed, and I will return to the effects of its mistaken claim repeatedly.⁴ But, for the moment, it is important to recognize that our sense of interpretive violence fits into a larger context in which literary criticism and moral philosophy converge. The symptoms of this alliance nevertheless must be read at their deepest levels to have any value for the ethics of criticism. In its sensitivity to its own violence, whether false or not, literary criticism demonstrates both its affinity with the history of ethics and its status as a human science, for it is precisely the appearance of the critical sensitivity to violence that defines literary criticism as anthropologically, psychologically, and ethically determined.

What is at stake ethically in the idea of critical violence? If critical language is by nature violent, then the act of criticism becomes ethically suspicious, to say the least, and those who engage in criticism must develop complicated attitudes and definitions of character to deal with their crises of conscience. The sensitivity of the theorist to the apparent violence of criticism contributes to the character of modern criticism, and the study of these ethical attitudes forms a part of the enterprise of the ethics of criticism. In one sense, this book attempts to write not a history of critical ideas but a genealogy of the character of modern critical theory. The idea of genealogy here does not refer to its present fashionable definition as a strategy to avoid

4. I have contested critical theory's rather absolutist equation between language and violence on a variety of fronts. In Chapter 4, I show how Derrida's and Lévi-Strauss's claims for the relation between violence and writing cannot account for the fact that language acts again and again to defer aggressive actions. In Chapter 5, I explain that Keats's moral philosophy undoes de Man's argument for the similarity between linguistic arbitrariness and death; and in Chapter 7, I analyze how the Freudian theory of sexuality misconstrues the ability of the unconscious to create representations that permit a recovery from violence. Finally, in Chapters 8 and 9, I argue that suffering is only a commodity, not a property of literature, and that the false analogy between literature and war created by nuclear critics endangers their ethical hopes. For an account of this problem in another register, see my "Language, Violence, and the Sacred: A Polemical Survey of Critical Theories," *Stanford French Review* 10.1-3 (1986): 203-20.

the totalizing movement of historicism. The substitution of "genealogy" for "history" today in fact represents one more attempt by critical thinkers to escape the violence of human history. Nor should genealogy be read in opposition to anthropological designs as a type of archaeological project concerned with the strata of meaning. Rather, genealogy refers to human relations and the lineage of character. For all the influence that Nietzsche has had on the modern scene, it remains difficult to understand genealogy in the sense that he uses it. Nietzsche's project in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is to study the character behind moral claims, which is why he strives again and again to describe the personalities of the man of resentment, the priestly caste, the noble Greek, the nihilist, and the ascetic.

Modern critical theory has its own cast of characters. It speaks in a discourse largely concerned with issues of language, but behind its definitions of language lie ideals of human character. The study of these attitudes can be pursued in a variety of ways. The slippage between the autonomy of human will, proposed within the moral philosophy of Kant, and the autonomy of language, found in the New Criticism and poststructuralist theory, proves a most fertile ground for interrogating the character of language. What is at stake, however, as I try to demonstrate in my readings in ethical criticism from Plato to pluralism and the ethics of autonomy is not merely the naming of a hidden ethos. The substitution of language for the self produces its own distinct moral dilemma because it has created a view of human consciousness in which ethical reflection is always destined to fail. The character of language promoted by theory today makes extremely difficult the type of consciousness necessary to moral reflection.

Here it is impossible not to discuss the influence of Freud and Nietzsche on modern ideas of both character and language. Modern critics return insistently to Freud as well as to Nietzsche because they are the most inspired students of the ethical implications of will, consciousness, and unconsciousness. But, unfortunately, the interest in them on the modern scene is rarely expressed in terms of such fundamental ethical issues. Rather, Freud and Nietzsche have become theorists of language. The

contribution of psychoanalysis to the ethics of criticism remains especially powerful, for modern theorists have in many cases adopted Freud's idea of the unconscious as a model to describe linguistic structure, and consequently their idea of language both asserts and seems to displace a series of ethical difficulties associated with consciousness and unconsciousness. To understand the real influence of Freud and Nietzsche, we must restore the original context of their arguments, arguments that turn inevitably on the human self and its self-representation. Only then will the true character of their impact on the modern scene emerge.

Despite the insistence on the importance of language, then, critical theory never abandons the problem of character and self-representation. The one figure that best demonstrates this assertion is the critic. The character of the critic in modern literary theory is only and everywhere presented in ethical terms. The expression used most often is "disinterestedness." The word carries appropriately moral associations, but it underestimates the extent to which modern theory wishes to remove the critic from a world of violence and ethical dilemmas. The modern critic is literally not of this world. Even a theorist such as Edward Said, whose principal notion of late is worldliness, places the critic in a genealogy extending from Matthew Arnold's "alien" critic to his own "exiled" critic. Said insists on maintaining the persona of the exile, going so far as to describe Lukács's "transcendental homelessness" as the ideal state toward which all good literary critics should aspire.⁵ Such homelessness is the

5. I cite from Gary Hentzi and Anne McClintock, "An Interview with Edward W. Said," *Critical Texts* 3.2 (1986): 6–13. Notice the religious and ethical rhetoric of the otherworldly and alien critic's "mission": "Matthew Arnold uses the word *alien* to describe the critic: somebody who isn't anchored in class but is more or less adrift. For me the figure of the exile is terribly important, because you reach a point where you realize that exile is irreversible. If you think of it in this way, then it becomes a really powerful image; but if you think that the exile can be repatriated—find a home—well, that's not what I'm talking about. If you think of exile as a permanent state, however, both in the literal and in the intellectual sense, then it's a much more promising, if difficult, thing. Then you're really talking about movement, about homelessness in the sense in which Lukács talks about it in *The Theory of the Novel*—'transcendental homelessness'—which can acquire a particular intellectual mission that I associate with criticism" (7–8).

proof that the critic is not implicated in either repression or normality, but this rhetoric also represents the critic as exclusive and different when compared to ordinary mortals.

In this characterization, Said is certainly not alone. A moral defensiveness pervades the definition of the critic's character in almost every major thinker on the current scene. Each tries to capture an aura of innocence and moral disinterestedness by cultivating personal marginality. Lévi-Strauss uses the idea of *dépaysement* to characterize the anthropologist. Foucault allies himself with the outcasts of history. Derrida appropriates Rousseau's rhetoric of marginality to develop a theory of linguistic difference that enacts a kind of morality play dependent on Rousseau's ideas of human equality and difference. Paul de Man builds on this tradition by securing with the greatest force the special ethical power that modern thought attributes to the role of the exile and victim. De Man's rhetoric ensures a perfect ethical system at an enormous cost to his idea of the critic. At the level of theory, he condones a radical idea of meaning in which the human is erased. At the level of practice, his critic attains an ethical status by embracing a logic of martyrdom, in which one turns against oneself in a gesture of moral sacrifice and self-denunciation. The theories of Nietzsche and Girard often reveal the religious and philosophical contexts of this victimary position and work to represent, with various degrees of success and failure, those strategies of willing and knowledge that oppose unconsciousness and resentful emotions. But both thinkers tend to represent the critical consciousness as exiled or marginal. Only feminist criticism, to my knowledge, has foreseen the dangers of turning marginality and suffering into a commodity or privileged claim to critical insight. The character of the feminist critic is in the main keenly and self-consciously balanced between the desire for difference and the hope of equality.

Literature is a human activity, and the character of criticism must remain as resolutely human. The power of marginality in the modern world is an inescapable fact, but this power is purchased at an enormous expense by modern critics. It places criticism in the margins of life. It expels literature as an undervalued and flawed manner of thinking, if it gives literature the

status of thought at all. A marginal position may be converted into a sensational claim for literature and the critic, but its value is highly suspicious in the final analysis. It cloaks itself in mystical language to achieve a distance from the real issues of living and choosing in the world. But, in fact, living and choosing in the human world are the only true subjects of literature.

I do not deny that these essays express great concern over the ethical choices made by modern theorists, but this book is not an exposé aimed at the so-called immoral practices of critics. Its purpose remains more subtle and positive, working to examine to what extent a selected group of theorists contributes to a definition of ethical thought. No critic here detracts from this project, no matter how severe the polemics against him or her may seem. Indeed, there is finally a question whether anyone on the current scene conceives of a criticism that is not ethical. Only ethics effectively reveals the coherence implicit in the diversity of critical approaches today. Far from being a battleground of contesting ideologies, modern literary theory comprises a united front when it comes to the importance given to the ethics of criticism. There is something hopeful in that thought, and, without being sentimental, we may consider its promise.