

Title

The Ethics of Alterity and the Ethics of Care in Literary Studies

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Abstract

The ethics of care has regularly been described via contrast with deontological, consequentialist, and virtue theories of ethics. Often, such descriptions play care and justice against one another as potentially congruent but frequently competing social goods. This articulation of the field, which moves across major perspectives within moral and political philosophy, does not fully describe how ethics appears in some areas of humanities, particularly literary studies, where an “ethics of alterity” has predominated for several decades. This ethics emphasizes a scene of encounter across difference, and an ethical responsibility to the other which has been narrativized via the scene of hospitality. This essay proposes that the ethics of care and the ethics of alterity share much—more than care ethics shares with other kinds of moral philosophy. But it also identifies differences which have made it easier to position alterity, rather than care, as a guiding ethos for literature, literary criticism, and literature education. Why is this so, and what would it mean for the ethics of care to be more central in literary study and literature education? Taking as an occasion a novel explicitly concerned with care-taking and care-giving, J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man* (2005), the essay explores the prospects for a care-focused practice of literary studies.

Keywords

Ethics, alterity, care, literature, Coetzee

1) Introduction

Why teach literature? Amidst a host of differing practices, we can discern a relatively limited set of answers. Some teach literature for purposes of motivation, to mobilize the lure of characters and story-worlds, for example in language teaching (e.g., Lazer 1993). Some teach literature so that individuals and societies benefit from the generational accumulation of local, nation, or global experience, as in the discourses of “cultural literacy” (e.g., Hirsch 1983) and “world literature” (e.g., Damrosch 2003). Some teach literature to mobilize and enhance processes of cognition and reflection, as in accounts of “critical literacy” (e.g., Freire & Macedo 1987) or the broader project of “critique.” Emerging from these, yet distinct, another answer has gained ground in recent years: some teach literature to provide encounters with difference, with diversity, with alterity. Students and other readers, the argument runs, can read literature to better understand and empathize with people who are not like themselves. This sense of the value of literature as providing access to other lives, experiences, or ways of thinking—often across forms of difference like gender, race, nation, or class—has come to the forefront wherever justifications for literary study are offered: curriculum time in schools; resources for libraries; funding for humanities organizations, literacy projects, and community-building.

Ethical answers to the question “why teach literature?” have, according to Suzanne Keen and other scholars, come to have a defining role in the discipline of literary studies, particularly in the English-speaking world.¹ Indeed, even where literary scholars understand their contributions primarily as political, the critique of power or inequality often usually integrates ethical ideas.² Some of the most influential texts and ideas in contemporary literary studies can readily be seen as components of this large consensus: Gayatri Spivak on subalternity, Giorgio Agamben on the exception, Judith Butler on mourning, Jacques Rancière on the distribution of sensibility. Dorothy Hale, in a series of essays culminating in *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020) has consolidated the sense that “For these new ethicists and a wave of others, the ethical value of literature lies in the felt encounter with alterity that it brings to its reader” (2009, p. 899). This essay does not contest the contributions of contemporary ethical criticism or advocate a “turn” to care ethics. The strong arguments

¹ For example, the primary previous encounter in *EPAT* with literature education was its 2013 special issue on “Shifting Focus: Strangers and Strangeness in Literature and Education.” The essays focused on the figure of the stranger to link literature education and the ethics of alterity.

² The relative precedence of ethical and political approaches is a matter of ongoing negotiation in literary studies. The main current at present may well be the impulse to avoid distinguishing ethics from politics. For a recent discussion of politics in literary criticism, see Robbins 2022.

which the ethics of alterity offer are crucial to literary study and literature education in increasingly plural and globalizing societies, especially where those societies disavow their patterns of exclusion and exploitation. Instead, like Hale, this essay offers perspective to open questions: if the ethics of alterity is a relatively recent acquisition for literary study, what has it supplemented or displaced? What might lie beyond its conceptual limits? What are its futures?

The present essay asks these questions in light of two observations. First, in recent years, the concept of “care” has exploded in prevalence in academic, public, and political discourse (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). New care theorizing first inspired this growth, then has been all but swamped beneath a wave of corporate and institutional “carewashing.” As a result, “ethics of care” discourse, which emerged as much as forty years ago in works by Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Joan Tronto, has become newly salient. In this new situation, of what relevance is the ethics of care, the politics of care, or the new care theory, to the reading and teaching of literature?

Second, although the ethical criticism in literary studies grew up alongside the ethics of care—both emerged in the eighties and were distinct, self-reflexive discourses by the turn of the millennium—there has been strikingly little cross-pollination or reciprocal influence across these two kinds of ethical thinking. Retrospective accounts of the ethical turn in criticism note a spate of monographs, edited collections, and journal issues around the turn of the millennium, including a 1998 *Style* special issue, a 1999 *PMLA* special issue, a 2002 *diacritics* special issue, and the 2001 edited collection *Mapping the Ethical Turn*. Yet a canvas of this material shows that despite widespread discussion of ethics in criticism and literature, critics have virtually never accessed the ethics of care. What might we now learn by diversifying the kinds of ethics informing literary studies? Below I will propose that for all their overlap, there are distinctions in emphasis which can lead literary studies in new directions.

To see how the connection has been missed, consider an example. In 2005, J.M. Coetzee published *Slow Man*, a novel explicitly about care and caring. Coetzee’s Australian protagonist, Paul Rayment, has suffered an amputation. He falls for his state-provided caregiver, Marijana, eventually making an unwanted confession: “You have taken care of me; now I want to give something back, if you will let me. I offer to take care of you” (*Slow Man*, n.p.). Coetzee’s proxy, the novelist Elizabeth Costello, then arrives in Rayment’s life

and criticizes his gauche attempt to change the nature of his relationship with Marijana. To Elizabeth, Paul eventually complains:

“[T]he kind of care I seek is, alas, not provided in any nursing home I am aware of.’

‘And what kind of care might that be?’

‘Loving care.’

‘Yes, that is indeed hard to come by nowadays, loving care. You might have to settle for mere good nursing. There is such a thing as good nursing, you know.’ (*Slow Man*, n.p.)

In the novel’s final pages, Paul rejects Elizabeth’s offer to form a marriage of mutual care, saying that “this is not love. This is something else. Something less” (*Slow Man*, n.p.).

Is care less than love? Is care more than nursing? From premise to conclusion, *Slow Man* dwells on exactly the questions that have animated the ethics and politics of care. Yet while critics have not failed to notice the word “care,” none of the several dozen critical accounts of *Slow Man* published in the last 20 years directly takes up care, or the ethics of care, as these ideas have been articulated in the highly coherent, relatively prominent genealogy of thought which extends forward from works by Carol Gilligan and her cohort of care theorists. Indeed, most critics—including those for whom “care” is the central concept of *Slow Man*—do not even allude to this discourse, even as they sometimes advert to Michel Foucault on the “care of the self” or the care provided by “neoliberal welfare states.” To take two book-length examples: Arne de Boever’s *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (2013) begins with a chapter on *Slow Man*, but only deigns to theorize care once the state has abrogated it. *The Slow Philosophy of JM Coetzee* by Jan Wilm (2016) takes *Slow Man* as a key to the Coetzee oeuvre and quotes the same sentences which are quoted above—but offers no theoretical account of care at all.

These rather studious omissions provide the impetus of the present essay. Despite a wide-ranging “ethical turn,” the ethics of care has played a minimal role in literary studies. This essay proposes that the ethics of care and the ethics of alterity share much—more than care shares with other kinds of moral philosophy. Here it may already be enough to say that both alterity and care are forms of *ethos* or *habitus* rather than philosophies of morality. But it also identifies differences between alterity and care which have made it easier to position alterity, rather than care, as a guiding ethics for literary study and literature education. It is useful to speculate about why, if only to ponder different futures. If the situation gives

indications of changing, why? What do the ethics of alterity and the ethics of care now have to offer to readers and teachers of literature? If these approaches are complementary, what do they offer each other?

2) The Ethics of Care

The genealogy of the ethics of care is a story well-told in many previous publications (e.g., Jackson 2018). For present purposes, that genealogy can be understood in three phases associated with three particularly influential books: Nel Noddings's *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1986), Virginia Held's *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (2005), and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017). Each of these texts represents a decisive inflection of the ethics of care. They also self-consciously build on one another and elaborate core components. For heuristic purposes, I propose that these components are four in number: relationality, responsibility, emotion, and action.

While largely congruent with Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking argument in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1984), Nel Noddings's decisive 1986 book *Caring* presents care *as an ethics* which can be learned, taught, practiced, and contravened. For Noddings, the ethics of care emerges as actions taken to meet needs in face-to-face situations, especially in intimate relationships, like those between partners, parents, and children. Noddings is concerned to underline that deliberation about right action, as the fundamental way of thinking about ethics that has obtained in moral philosophy and moral education, does not characterize the whole sphere of ethical thought and practice. Instead, in many situations defined by emotional engagement and embedded relationality, people offer one another help and love without asking themselves abstract questions about right and wrong, justice or equality. Nonetheless, Noddings argues forcefully that care's relational dynamics and dispositions are components of and guides to ethical action. Alongside important contributions by Sarah Ruddick (1989) and others, Noddings' work distinguished a paradigm of ethical thinking from existing approaches and has set the terms of the conversation through to the present.

A revision which Noddings made to her book when it was reissued in 2013 proves essential to understanding the "ethics of care" discourse and its reception in literary studies. Replacing the word "feminine," to give the subtitle "A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education," Noddings at once centered the most important keyword in the ethics of

care—relational—and subordinated women and the maternal relation as paradigmatic origins and instances of care. This change seems to have been made to address the single largest liability that has faced the ethics of care, namely a critique which regarded it as an “essentialist” way of thinking premised on an account of what mothers do for their children. Although *Caring* was continuously at pains to avoid this interpretation, the reception of care discourse has been marked pervasively by talk about “essentialism.” For example, Joan Tronto, who made major early contributions to the ethics of care in works like *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethics of Care* (1993), nonetheless found it necessary begin her 2013 book *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* by articulating again that the mother-child relation is one instance among many relations and scenes of care.

Virginia Held’s *Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (2005) articulates what care theorists and activists felt to be most important in a second phase of the development of care ethics: how care can operate beyond the realm of the home and private sphere, in public and in politics, and how care can operate at a distance, beyond the face-to-face and beyond the imagined community of the nation. To accomplish these expansions, Held closely maintains Nodding’s emphasis on relationality, the meeting of needs, and the role of emotion, while supplementing Nodding’s focus on spontaneous acts of care which emerge within close and enduring relations. Held argues that relations of care can come to characterize polities and their forms of organization, relations between states, and relations among far distant and even anonymous people around the world. The impulse to broaden and generalize care and care ethics is ongoing and can be seen in important contributions by Daniel Engster (2007) and Eva Feder Kittay (2019).

Recently, in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has offered major renovations in the ethics of care discourse by introducing poststructural perspectives drawn from Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Approaching care from these perspectives results, first, in a further centralization of the concept of relationality. Indeed, it inverts the emphasis of previous writers on the importance of relations to caring subject-objects; now those affective relations of care tend to precede the phenomenal emergence of subjects. Moreover, rather than taking human action as paradigmatic for care or caring, Puig de la Bellacasa insists on the material embeddedness of care in a world of relations among actors and actants which may not be human. From such a perspective it appears superfluous to consider how care relations could be “extended,” for

example from the personal to the political, or from the local to the global. Care, on this telling, suffuses life and matter; as her title implies, care is a myriad “mattering.”

In addition, influential work by Arlie Hochschild regarding “emotional labour” (1983) and “global care chains,” (2002) has introduced a wide-ranging element of political economy into care discourse which has made care talk more available to both historical materialist and postcolonial strains of thought. A phrase like “care work” no longer seems primarily to refer to care conducted by the family within the family, but instead to networks of low-waged labour often performed in circumstances of duress and displacement. Hochschild’s influence can be seen in recent work by Chatzidakis et. al. (2020) and by Hamington and Flowers (2021). That an “ethics of care” ought to pertain to these developments and concepts is clear, but in this evolving discourse, care talk may be simply less centered than previously on ethics.

Major books by Noddings, Held, and Puig de la Bellacasa, along with work by Hochschild, evince a maintenance of major concepts in the ethics of care while also showing progression and evolution. The major concepts in the discourse, across these four authors, can be summarized as relationality, responsibility, emotion, and action. In its *relationality*, this discourse insists that ethics is never only about individual actors making decisions in defined situations. Ethics also includes interpersonal dynamics and individual differences; it refuses to abstract away from embeddedness and situatedness, habit and dailiness.

Responsibility means that relations do not preexist commitments or obligations, but are constituted by them. *Emotion* means that ethics is never reducible to moral reasoning, but involves intuition and embodiment. And finally, *action* means that care ethics is not about attitudes or principles, but consists in what people actually do. Via these four insistences, the ethics of care has successfully distinguished itself from consequentialist, deontological, and virtue theories of moral philosophy.

3) The Ethics of Alterity

To what extent do similar concepts and approaches animate the reading and teaching of literature? In order to discern patterns of continuity with the ethics of care, I review how the new ethical criticism emerged. A touchstone in this intellectual genealogy is an essay by Martha Nussbaum published in 1983 on the subject of “Literature and/as Moral Philosophy.” In the essay Nussbaum emphasizes a strong version of her title’s claim:

[T]he claims of [Henry James' novel *The Golden Bowl*] concerning value and imperfection are views whose plausibility and importance are difficult to assess without the sustained exploration of particular lives that a text such as this [novel] makes possible. (41)

Some moral philosophy, in other words, can only be conducted *as* or *via* literature. For Nussbaum, James' novel suggests that the moral principles imagined in disciplinary moral philosophy are constrained in their capacity to give an account of morality which goes beyond the deliberative, rational weighing of reasons or consequences:

It is a further fact about the views of this text that they are views very seldom put forward and seriously examined in works of moral philosophy. And this, I claim, is no accident. Any view of deliberation that holds that it is, first and foremost, a matter of intuitive perception and improvisatory response . . . is likely to clash with certain classical aims and assertions of moral philosophy, which has usually claimed to [set] us up in a watertight system of rules. (42)

She concludes that James' novel embodies the following moral philosophy:

Respond with the vibrant sympathy of a vividly active imagination. If there are conflicts, face them squarely and with keen perception. Choose as well as you can for overt action, but at every moment remember the more comprehensive duties of the imagination and emotions. The ideal is summarized by James in his preface to *The Princess Casamassima* as one of "being finely aware and richly responsible." (35)

Nussbaum went on to argue that James intentionally put his "moral view" into his novel for readers to discover: "'Art,' James writes, 'is nothing if not exemplary,' [and] 'care is nothing if not active'" (41). When it was published, Nussbaum's account of literature as moral philosophy encountered considerable criticism, as has her subsequent work in this area, including *Love's Knowledge* (1992), *Poetic Justice* (1997), and *Upheavals of Thought* (2003).³ However, Nussbaum's general claim—namely that literary texts have ethical

³ Many have suspected that Nussbaum's ethics come at the expense of literature. For a sense of Nussbaum's reception, see Harpham 1992: "Nussbaum should not be considered a scholar

important, that literature often simply is moral philosophy—has gone on to become disciplinary common sense. For our purposes the most striking feature of Nussbaum’s 1983 essay is that it overtly compasses both the *ethos* of care ethics and its central concepts. Nussbaum shows that James is invested primarily in his characters’ densely entangled *relationships*, and that he examines how those relations result in *responsibility* to one another. She shows that this responsibility cannot be activated except by accessing faculties like imagination, awareness, and the *emotions*. And finally, she reads James to suggest that ethics involves not reasons or attitudes, but *actions*. These four factors come together in an account of “literature as moral philosophy” that strikingly resembles those articulated by Noddings, Held, and Puig de la Bellacasa.

Why, though, should we understand Nussbaum’s ethics primarily as an ethics of “alterity”? While alterity is not a term Nussbaum uses, what Dorothy Hale will term an “ethics of alterity” is implicit. In Nussbaum’s account of James’ design,

Our active care for Maggie and our acceptance of the invitation to see as Maggie sees have brought upon us (upon the “we” composed of author and reader) a blindness with respect to [another] part of the moral world. (47)

Because we care for Maggie, we fail to care for others. This is the major conclusion of Nussbaum’s essay, and—despite its use of the term “care”—the conclusion typifies the ethics of alterity. In that ethics, intersubjective difference is a dilemma. The characteristic scene of ethical import is one in which one claim goes unfulfilled precisely because another is fulfilled. Reading through several decades of discussion in “ethical criticism” on the one hand and the “ethics of care” on the other hand suggests that this is a characteristic difference in emphasis between the ethics of alterity and the ethics of care. The former consistently provides figurations of dilemma, of an indebtedness that cannot be paid. The ethics of care, while robustly aware of the necessity of tradeoff and compromise, does not fixate in this way.

We can further understand the difference in method—and the difference in tone—by looking at the “ethics of reading” propounded by J. Hillis Miller. In an influential series of works including *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) and *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990), Miller

with social concerns, but a moral and social reformer who uses scholarly methods and materials” (p. 54).

mobilizes the premises of “Yale school” deconstruction to give an ethical account of the “event” of reading:

The ethics of reading begins with the reader’s response to a parallel demand that each text be read, and even read again and again. . . . But in choosing to respond to the demand made by the book that has fallen by accident into my hands, I am betraying my responsibility to all the other books. This is a responsibility I can never fulfill. So I live in a perpetual condition of guilty arrears. (42)

Nussbaum’s sense of dilemma has, in Miller, been reoriented so that it takes place with respect to texts rather than to characters. This switch, which seemed at the time of these authors’ writing to move from one polarities of possibility in literary study to the other—liberal versus poststructural; humanist versus deconstructive—now appear quite similar.

The late turn to ethics in the work of Jacques Derrida probably provided the single strongest impetus to the ethics of alterity in literary studies. In dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, who sought to place ethics, rather than ontology or epistemology, as “first philosophy,” Derrida discovered “an ‘unlimited’ responsibility that precedes and exceeds my freedom” (Derrida 1999, p.3). The idea of a moral obligation that is “unlimited” also inflected the influential account Derrida gave of “hospitality” as both a feature of literary narratives (that is, scenes of encounter and welcome, or otherwise) and literary reading (that is, the ways readers open themselves to texts, or otherwise). Figuring “*the* law of unlimited hospitality” as in ineluctable tension with the “laws” in general (2000, p.7) Derrida’s accounts of both literature and literary reading confirmed the sense of ineradicable dilemma which Nussbaum and Miller had noted.

In this phase of theorizing the ethics of alterity, scenes of “hospitality” proved a crucial conceptual and imaginative resource. Whether these scenes involve opening a door or opening a border, hospitality has provided the ethics of alterity with a narrative structure and an ideal-typical figure, the “stranger”—with which many literary characters have been aligned. In the before-during-after of the archetypal encounter with the stranger, the entanglement of the other and the same was understood to give rise to an unpayable ethical debt. Around hospitality there then grew up a flourishing and indeed ongoing discourse closely linked to what Hale describes as literature’s ethics of alterity (Still 2012; Clapp and Ridge 2016; Battell 2023).

Following this lead, theorists like Derek Attridge, in works including *The Singularity of Literature* (2004); *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004); and *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (2010), consolidated a consensus that literature, ethics, and alterity are fundamentally linked. One special issue on ethics in literature opened with this declaration:

To borrow, translate, and adapt an Afrikaans term from the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach, literature engages in a process of *andersmaak*, of other-making or making-other: in making-other and, in so doing, inventing others, it makes itself other. Literature is an other-maker. It is to this activity that literary theory must attend. (Sanders 2002, p 4)

Similarly, Derek Attridge's most recent summary, *The Work of Literature* (2015), begins with a chapter on "justice," concludes with one on "hospitality" (and does not mention care or the ethics of care).

Perhaps "ethical criticism" is not now under continuous discussion as it was ten or twenty years ago. Yet it is plausible that this is because it has become disciplinary common sense. This account of the ethics of alterity as a keynote of contemporary literary studies suggests how literary studies has mobilized each of the four major elements of the ethics of care identified above. Whether ethical ties exist between characters, between readers and writers, or between texts, a sense of *relationality* animates contemporary literary criticism. These relations are fundamentally constituted as relations of *responsibility*, of ethical obligation. The impulse to honor those responsibilities and fulfill those obligations is not the result of moral deliberation or the application of rules, but instead an immanent, affective responsiveness: a process defined by *emotion*. And finally, as in the Derridean account of hospitality, we discern that an ethics of alterity is an ethics of *action*.

4) Alterity and Care

This broad agreement between the literary ethics of alterity and the ethics of care renders puzzling the dearth of references to the ethics of care in literary studies. Perhaps the very breadth of consensus makes direct references superfluous. However, there are also three domains of reasons why agreements about relationality, responsibility, emotion, and action have not been enough, and may still not be enough, to enable a rapprochement between these

two adjacent ways of thinking about ethics. I describe these three domains, which I will describe as *intrinsic*, *extrinsic*, and *narratological*, to suggest why it may be both possible and useful to supplement the ethics of alterity with the ethics of care.

The first domain of difficulties in bridging these discourses can be described as *intrinsic*. These are differences in the ways that the ethics of alterity and the ethics of care are formulated and conceptualized. The most striking difference is in conceptualizing the prototypical object of ethical action. For the ethics of alterity, this is the stranger. For the ethics of care—despite caveats—this is the child. The Derridean scene of hospitality does not describe, in equal measure and with equal felicity, opening a door to a stranger in need, and comforting the child with a familiar lullaby. Nor does any prototypical scene of care, like bathing a child at bedtime, amount to a likely framing of ethical action with respect to a stranger. Theorists of alterity-based ethics may reply that to some extent, everyone is a stranger, an other—one can even make an ethics of seeing “oneself as another” (Ricoeur 1992). Yet this objection does not obviate the consequences of beginning from different prototypical scenes. For alterity and care, such scenes are not mere thought experiments, like the trolley problems of moral consequentialism. Because care and alterity approaches lack the rule- or premise-bound structure of other forms of ethical thought, and because they are committed to the embeddedness of ethical decision-making, different prototypical instances necessarily lead alterity and care to different priorities and responses.

A second concern, already mentioned, emerges with respect to a differing emphasis when it comes to *dilemma*, a dominant trope in the ethics of alterity, versus the need for *compromise* which is acknowledged in every account of the ethics of care. For thinkers as disparate as Martha Nussbaum and Jacques Derrida, ethical engagement and ethical action consists quite centrally in failing. In this discourse, the stranger’s alterity can never be accommodated without tipping into a kind of conceptual violence which, at best, makes the other into the same. Because the ethics of care seems less committed to finding itself at such crossroads, one potential contribution of the ethics of care to this scene of theoretical exchange is to provide less melodramatic (even less theological) figurations of ethical encounter. An objection might be that to compromise is merely to resolve dilemma, so that these two paradigms differ only as two moments in a single process. Yet the rejoinder, again, is that such differences matter when ethics is a function of the way the moral imagination conceptualizes situations.

The final intrinsic reason that these discourses seem to differ is their account of *presence*, which appears in the ethics of care as an account of faciality, of the face-to-face

encounter. The ethics of care first unfolded care as a phenomenon by dwelling on the dynamics of in-person engagement, with attention to touch and awareness of gesture, breath, scent. The ethics of alterity in literary studies is committed, by contrast, to the idea that ethical relations can obtain beyond the face-to-face, between readers and characters, between readers and authors, between readers and texts. This returns us to the difference in what might be described as the original “focal distance” of these two discourses: where the ethics of alterity “sights” the distant stranger, the ethics of care “sights” the present family. Indeed, one can put the matter more broadly: the ethics of alterity in literary studies, despite its influences, began with *representations* in literary studies. The ethics of care has its origins in psychology, history, sociology, and political theory and has always directly advocated real political change.

These three intrinsic reasons why the ethics of alterity and the ethics of care have not blended or melded more effectively are supplemented by three reasons which can be described, advisedly, as *extrinsic*. The first is the question of “essentialism.” References to the “nature” of the family or the “naturalness” of interpersonal bonds do appear in some ethics of care texts. Even when authors are cautious about these matters, it can be difficult to articulate what “care ethics” might be if not the simple propensity to “do what comes naturally” in certain highly local situations. While from the beginning theorists saw care as a portable modality that could be found in many places and among many populations, there may simply be no way for the ethics of care to avoid the constraints that result from “the rhetoric of exemplarity” (Gelley 1995). This rhetoric, which neither care discourse nor alterity discourse can fail to choose, necessitates originating instances to which they remain tethered, even as authors decry attempts to contain their arguments based on their examples.

The charge of “essentialism” has had a special salience for the reception of the “ethics of care” in literary studies. Antiessentialism characterizes nearly all major strands of thought in literary studies: Marxist and post-marxist, structural and post-structural, post-colonial and post-humanist. These ways of thinking, otherwise counterpoised, concur that essentialism is a major conceptual error. On top of this is the frequently—sometimes putatively—*political* character of much argument in literary studies. Despite Dorothy Hale’s argument that the leading notion in literary studies has been an *ethics* of alterity, for a large cohort of literary studies scholars, the important mode of thinking society through literature is politics, not ethics. Without being drawn into the question of how these two modes or domains exist relative to one another, it can be said with confidence that an “ethics of care” is not attractive to literary scholars who see their work as fundamentally political in character. Here the work

of Arlie Hochschild, and an associated move away from care as ethics and toward a political economy of caring labour, is likely to enable more care talk in literary studies.

This brings us to a final extrinsic consideration which may have limited the influence of the ethics of care in literary studies, namely the discipline's enduring masculinist bias. It should not escape comment, for example, that the ethics of alterity with its rapidly reversible and abstract logics (I am a stranger to you, you are a stranger to me), its moment of origin in the public sphere, and its attention to the "lord of the manor" who does or does not grant hospitality, define a mode of citizen subjectivity which is canonically male. Nor has it escaped notice that for all its "radicalism," the long moment of "high theory" was often characterized by the adulation of male genius. Whereas major figures in the care ethics tradition have been women.

Before proceeding in conclusion to potential *narratological* barriers to adopting the ethics of care in literary studies, a word about why these intrinsic and extrinsic factors may be less pressing than previously. Here the most critical development is the emergence of more-than-human relationality as a new originating instance for understanding care. The more-than-human relation, which is at once animal, environmental, and technological in its implications, frames care as readily moving across distances, across the difference between presence and absence, and, above all, into a sense that care for "the other" is primordial. In seeing care for the other as conceptually preceding care for the same, this substitution undoes the most basic intrinsic contrast between the ethics of alterity and the ethics of care. In addition, the notion of a more-than-human care ethics may undermine the focus in alterity discourse on scenes of dilemma. Indeed, the very thickness of the relational webs of care rendered in more recent accounts may come to seem like a ground truth against which the dilemmas of the ethics of alterity seem as fragile and constructed as trolley problems. If so, the very notion of the "scene of care" or, for that matter, the "event of reading," may become little more than conceptual archeology. Finally, by adopting frames of thinking like actor-network theory (Latour) or posthumanism (Haraway), a "speculative" ethics draws on accounts of self, subject, and society which are consonant with antiessentialist premises long espoused in literary studies and more congruent with its styles of argument. For all these reasons, then, literary studies may soon take up the ethics of care in a much more detailed way, as has happened in one or two recent monographs, like Talia Schaffer's *Communities of*

Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction (2021).⁴ As it does so, the ethics of alterity may undergo significant transformations, or may even be displaced as the defining paradigm of ethics in literary studies. At the same time, literary studies may also transition toward care as care discourse (as inflected by Arlie Hochschild or *The Care Manifesto*) comes to look more directly political.

5) Narrating Care

The ethics of alterity has been dominant in literary studies; the ethics of care has been neglected; this is changing. In offering this narrative, I have proceeded as though literature itself were equally susceptible to interpretation via either ethical paradigm. This is to conceive paradigms as lenses, such that writers, readers, teachers, and scholars could exchange one for the other. Other recent thinkers of ethics in literature, from Martha Nussbaum to Derek Attridge, also sometimes write as though there could be a wholesale congruence between the field of literature and a particular way of doing ethics. Such framings occlude at least two difficulties. The first is the likelihood that some literature—for example, literature written by women in the 19th century—might more readily be read and taught with reference to the ethics of care than might some other literature. The ethics of alterity might, for its part, be particularly pertinent to particular literatures—perhaps those which have emerged in the postcolony. It seems likely that the incorrigibly diverse field of literature contains clustered, inconsistent appeals to these two ethical kinds, alongside a great deal of writing which is simply less legible as ethical across its tropes, themes, and forms. If ethics can be many things, in other words, it is likely that literature is as well.

Having said this, however, readers and teachers should continue to explore the extent to which literature, perhaps particularly the novel, specifically embodies an ethics of alterity. Here Coetzee's work is not an arbitrarily selected instance. Much of Coetzee's work, from *Dusklands* (1974) to *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) to *Disgrace* (1999), is preoccupied with apartheid in South Africa. These books, rather than *illustrating* the literary ethics of alterity, have been a major locus for *developing* that ethics.

How then does Coetzee write when he has moved away from the South African context? *Slow Man*, set in Australia and without close engagement with race, is continuously preoccupied with care and caregiving. But in reading the book with both ethics of alterity and

⁴ One could make a study of the points of congruity and differences of emphasis between Schaffer's "care" reading of Victorian fiction and the "alterity" reading offered in Mitchell 2011.

ethics of care in mind, it appears that Coetzee struggles to form novelistic narrative around caregiving. The reason may be simple but profound: because everyday life and the work of social reproduction are their animating contexts and contents, caregiving and care are forms of repetition. Paul's wound requires tending every day for a long time. He must, in another slow and repetitive process, acquire new skills which can enable him to live well in his changed body. Yet *Slow Man* moves rapidly past these repetitive scenes:

Weeks pass; he settles into Marijana's regimen of care. Each morning she takes him through his exercises, massages his wasted and wasting muscles; discreetly she helps him in what he cannot do without a helping hand, what he may never learn to do unaided. (*Slow Man* n.p.)

Caring is the premise of Coetzee's book and must be said to form its theme. But the narrative does not dwell on caring in practice, instead gathering its energy from misrecognition—which is to say, from encounters between strangers. Chief among these is Paul's misplaced declaration of love:

'Surely you must know, Marijana,' he whispers. His mouth is dry, his heart is thudding, it is as awful and as thrilling as when he was sixteen. 'Surely a woman always knows.'

Again she shakes her head. She seems genuinely puzzled. 'Don't understand.'

'I will tell you in private.'

She murmurs to the child. Obediently Ljuba picks up her little pink backpack and trots off to the kitchen.

'There,' says Marijana. 'Now say.'

'I love you. That is all. I love you and I want to give you something. Let me.'

(*Slow Man*, n.p.)

This declaration breaks the caring relationship which had been established between Marijana and Paul. Given the novel's theme, it is tempting to read Paul as having traduced the ethics of care. But the actual problem is that Paul traduces the ethics of alterity: he wants to make the different into the same, to make the distant into the close. When Paul says "a woman always knows"—and she doesn't—it becomes all too clear that he is not reaching beyond himself, but instead looking in a mirror.

Slow Man carries forward, rather than moving beyond, Coetzee's longstanding investment in the ethics of alterity. It is striking that *Slow Man* maintains this almost infrastructural investment in alterity in the context of care and care-work. But as this brief discussion has suggested, this may result as much from the exigencies of literary narrative as from Coetzee's preoccupations. What would it be like to read an account of Marijana's care for Paul which actually occupied the time and space of the work of healing (or the work of learning)? It is not for nothing that, even after a century's experimentation with forms of slowness, digression, and duration, the novel usually offers novelty: *a man goes on a journey* or *a stranger comes to town*. If there is any validity to the oft-banded idea that these are the nuclei of story as such, then the ethics of the stranger may be umbilically connected to narrative. It may always be difficult to write, read, or teach a narrative literature which is as directly preoccupied with the ethics of care.

I said above that virtually all accounts of *Slow Man* neglect the tradition of feminist care ethics. A recent contribution forms a partial exception and suggests an apt conclusion. Benjamin Robinson (2020) reads *Slow Man* to suggest that fiction and care share marginalization. Each is marginalized at the expense of discourses which manage to present themselves as more grounded, more fundamental, more "serious." Appeals to the significance of fiction usually fall on deaf ears, Robinson suggests, when compared to history, to politics, to science, to fact. Pleas to care more, care better, or to create a caring society have often been subordinated to ostensibly more tough-minded and rigorous idioms of ethics and politics, like justice, rights, or equality—and, I would add, alterity. In "sharing the disparaged form of fiction," Robinson suggests, care might find its way forward. Yet another solution is equally simple. If Coetzee cannot author a fiction of care, or if the novel is an unlikely medium of care ethics, there are many other places we might choose to look. Perhaps, in its emphasis on voice rather than narrative, poetry may offer more ready means of exploring a literary ethics of care. Perhaps drama, in its different relations to embodiment, offers more intuitive connections to care as an embodied practice. Film and the novel have different means of representing time; perhaps the repetitive quality of care is more susceptible to screening. Perhaps the aesthetics and ethics of care are not finally to be located in "art." These are no more than suggestions.⁵ Yet as the ethics and politics of care come under sustained discussion across contemporary culture, literary studies should look closely at its

⁵ For poetry and care, see Hamington and Rosenow (Eds.) 2019. For theater and care, see Thompson 2015. For film and care, see Kupfer 2012. For care and the "ordinary" see Laugier 2015.

ethical and political commitments. Whatever the result, there is much to be learned here about what literary studies and literature education has been and can be.⁶

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