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NorLit 2011 Conference on Literature and Politics

Political Acts and Others: Commitments of Literary Response

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The link between literature and politics may occur spontaneously, occasioned by the reader's sense of urgency inherent in the social embedding of a certain text. Spontaneity is after all central to reading. A sound skepticism in the service of methodology, however, cautions against the uncontested sway of such spontaneity when a more analytical attitude and purpose are required. In this paper, I propose to relativize the political aspect of literature by focusing on two rivalling claims for literary significance and value–the aesthetic and ethical. My title is to intended to place the political, not only in relation to those subjected to political acts, but also in relation to other kinds of acts. The secondary title alludes to Sartre's idea of committed writing, but shifts the aim of commitment to literary response. The literary intentionality of the text requires a committed response, a virtual act within which the political or other aims acquire their distinctive literary form. As we shall see, this virtual act is subject to various types of theorizing that reflect different political agendas.

The word political can be and is often used as a synonym for ideological or social, or by contrast, it refers more strictly to relations of power. It is the second, more restrictive meaning of the political that I wish to employ here and whose relation to other literary values and modes of inquiry I will explore. The concern with power as a social practice

focuses on strategies of domination and resistance while the theoretical concern focuses on justice – in our time typically, but not exclusively -- democracy and the ideal of equality. This second focus should be distinguished from the ethical, in particular when the ethical is conceived, not as a categorical imperative but as a responsibility for a unique other that cannot be codified as universal law.

In the context of literary studies, it is often said that everything is political, but this slogan merely justifies a certain interpretive procedure. The meaning of this claim is perhaps best understood when one restores the implicit contrary statement that literature is aesthetic. Ironically, however, the art for art's sake sake movement and the interpretive practice that emphasizes the symbolic, non-instrumental quality of literature includes reactions against political or moral strictures in terms of which the assertion that literature is an end in itself becomes liberating gesture.

Actually, if literature is concerned with the adequacy and appeal of form, the discussion of the relative claims of the aesthetic and political can only concern degree: to what extent we have art for art's sake or for a political or ethical sake. The demand for the instrumental function can be so strong that resistance to it can have the effect of restoring the political within what I have called the tension of the virtual act. The extreme insistence on the political which fails to recognize the importance of the aesthetic aim becomes formalistic, an end in itself. Paradoxically, it is the abstract political demand which then becomes aesthetic, an aestheticized politics.

Similar objections can be raised against categorical moral or ethical demands on literature, but for literary ethics today this is no great issue, since ethics is increasingly thought in terms of a virtual act. In the words of Adam Zachary Newton, "the limits bounding the ethics of fiction [. . .] are ones posed by reading and responding to fiction – to be reckoned as one performs and interprets a text – and not facilely breached in order to apply "lessons for life". The profoundest meaning of narrative ethics, then, may be justthis sheer fact of limit, of separateness, of boundary". That the same may be said for the politics of fiction is evident, for, as Newton goes on to observe, "the ethical need not be consigned to a realm lying outside history and politics." But the view that "political and historical contexts often write large the intersubjective details of narrative" is debatable (*Narrative Ethics* pp. 26-27). While it is true that the ethical generally operates at the micro level and the political at the macro level, their orientations differ. Ethics may extrapolate from the individual to the collective, and so it may seem that liberal democracy also does, based on concepts of equality and individual rights, but these concepts are already derived from the most general scale of social relations. Moreover, there are certainly instances where political aims take no concern of ethical demands, something which is most readily apparent in revolutionary times.

Let us consider some texts where the relation between politics and aesthetics, on the one hand, and between politics and ethics on the other, are exemplified.

Though one might draw a parallel between the mid-19th century realist novel in France and its English counterpart, Flaubert is also considered

an early modernist. In his 1857 novel, *Madame Bovary*, the combination of critical realism with a highly sophisticated stylistic performance, still remains a challenge for its new readers. Flaubert explained that he was attempting to create a novel of pure style, like a planet floating in space, held in orbit by the balance of opposing forces. It is an eloquent metaphor for his technique. Clearly, *Madame Bovary* is not a moral tale that indicts its eponymous protagonist, since the petty bourgeois characters with whom she is in conflict are no more attractively portrayed than she. In spite of being a sentimental romantic who is pathetically unfaithful to her husband , Emma is nevertheless a sympathetic character when contrasted with representatives of a materialistic middle class culture that she finds stultifying. The relative value of Mme her character emerges against the satirical background of the ambitious apothecary Hommais and the manipulative merchant L'Heureux who exploits Emma to the point of bankruptcy. Their dishonest skill contrasts with the ineptness of her doctor husband, Charles, who disfigures a club-footed patient in an ill-conceived operation. It is satire that is signalled in the initial description of the dull town of Yonville, appearing from a distance like a herd of cows sleeping by the river.

In this path-breaking novel, the aesthetic effect is achieved not only through elegant phrasing, original narrative structure and dramatic plotting but also through the attack on multiple political targets. It is a question of political satire having two mutually opposing points of view, a politics without party or position. One could make a case for the novel being predominantly a critique of the second Empire bourgeoisie, but that would miss the point: that the alternatives to petty bourgeois

materialism available in the novel are equally unacceptable: the stupidity of the simple and good-natured Charles, the sentimental idealism of the dreamy Emma who remains attached to a pre-revolutionary world. Nonetheless, one can observe that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* pursues an aesthetic ideal that is articulated in relation to politics and even consistent with realism.

In a very different social context, Toni Morrison has expressed a similar set of priorities: to be foremost a writer, objecting to the political use of "Black literature [. . .] taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form" (source?). One novel in which her aesthetic aims are clearly foregrounded is *Jazz*, as implied by the title. This novel, which tells the story of two characters who, "encouraged by guns and hemp", migrate north to the City, offers a critique of the modernist narrator. The narrator who claims to do a fine sunset, detached from her subject matter like a Joycean author who stands apart pairing his fingernails, gradually becomes more engaged and more personal in relation to her characters.

She comes to substitute a modernist aesthetic, evidently a product of the dominant white culture, for an African-American aesthetic of which jazz jazz is a conspicuous expression. Curiously enough, jazz in this novel signifies the beauty of the lost country side, recovered in an art form characteristic of the northern city and Harlem in particular. Though foregrounding an aesthetic orientation, however, *Jazz* is political in three senses: the aesthetic category as such is a reaction against the implicit demand for a sociological significance; the aesthetic is historicized and made ethnically specific; and aesthetic form is shown to have an experiential, referential significance.

To explain the lives of the city's inhabitants, the narrator of *Jazz* must go beyond the beautiful sunsets that the city "does" and penetrate below the interesting slant of light that falls between tall buildings. She must invent motives beyond the conversation that she overhears, and life histories beyond the circumference of city life. She must realize not only that the characters have a life of their own, inaccessible from her detached and objectivizing standpoint, but also that the act of imagination is ultimately an act of recognition and support. Finally. the narrator is able to hear the deeper meaning of jaxx, the kind of music that the two estranged but now reconciled lovers dance to in the novel's final scene:

> The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not lowdown the way they love to do it, but high and fine like a young girl singing by the side of a creek, passing the time, her ankles cold in the water. The young men with brass probably never saw such a girl, or such a creek, but they made her up that day. (*Jazz* [Knopf, 1992], 197)

Morrison reminds us that the aesthetic cannot stand in simple binary relation to the political, since the aesthetic is culturally and ethnically marked and thereby inscribed politically.

My next two thumbnail analyses concern politics and ethics, using Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Melville's *Benito Cereno* as examples.

Disgrace is significant for the present context because it deliberately chooses ethics over politics, reacting to a state policy which is viewed as merely expedient, even lacking in ethics. The backdrop of this South African novel is the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee

which was formed in 1996 to facilitate a peaceful transition from apartheid to a government with African National Congress majority. Though the beauty of the novel *Disgrace* lies in its subtlety, in the absence of narrative intrusions and didactics of any kind, I would nevertheless venture to say that its theme is clear: confession is no genuine repentance, deserving of forgiveness or justification; only spontaneous ethical actions can make a restored state of grace possible.

The main character, David Lurie, is an immoral person just this side of criminality, though he is not a person without sensibility. In the first chapter, we become acquainted with David's preference for superficial intimacy has he visits a prostitute. When this prostitute is no longer available to him, he exploits his position as university professor in aggressively seducing a student. The student files a complaint, but David, when asked to make a public confession, refuses to comply and is consequently dismissed from his academic position.

Paradoxically, the ethical is represented by the character who refuses to confess in what would be a false speech, a public ritual without ethical content intended to serve the political purpose of protecting the university's reputation. Three years after the Truth and Reconciliation Committee began its work of national healing, *Disgrace* is honored with the Booker prize, scandalizing many South African reviewers. The chief issue of contention is that the novel depicts the rape of a white woman by three black men, without treating the politics of post-apartheid South Africa. Just like David, Coetzee maintains silence with respect toinstitutional expectations: the novel is practically a satirical allegory on conciliatory South African politics. *Disgrace* questions, not only the truthfulness of confession, but its efficacy as such: instead of ethical

words, there has to be action. At the end, David appears in a posture of mercy, holding in his arms an ailing dog whose suffering he feels great compassion for and wondering whether it is time to let him go, to give him the lethal injection that will speed up the inevitable end. The reader is left with the question whether David has been returned to a state of grace.

While ethics in *Disgrace* is offered in critique of political theatrics, ethics can of course also constitute an evasion of the political. A good example is Melville's *Benito Cereno*, in which a liberal-minded, good-natured American captain fails, because of the devotion to a white master he ironically attributes to slave, to realize the true situation on a slave ship taken over by mutiny. Captain Delano is as incapable of seeing through the deception of the mutineers as he is of realizing that the humanity of the enslaved Africans can express itself in violent resistance. Another irony is that, when a white member of the captive crew attempts to alert the captain to the true nature of circumstances, the captain is cast in the pose of justice on a heraldic emblem, trampling under his foot the dark satyr in the figure of the mutiny leader and pretended manservant Babo. The political trial that follows After Delano’s men have taken control of the situation is of course not ethical, nor just – but simply a demonstration of power and justification of that slavery on which the economies of New World colonies depended.

Having written a novella that underscores the hypocrisy of a morality based on the belief in the goodness of human nature, Melville might have used the same warning to introduce this story as Samuel Clemens later in the adventures of Huckleberry Finn: “Persons attempting to find a moral in [this narrative] will be banished.” Critics who analyze Huck’s

moral development miss the point of Clemens essentially political satire and fail to understand the ironic persona that is it major vehicle.

In the 1970s, earlier statements about the ideological nature of literature began to be replaced by statements that literature is political. What is the difference, why did this shift occurred at this time? I believe the difference is that, while ideology is a matter of domination concealed by means of naturalized description, the political signifies that the text is not merely analyzed as ideological encoding of social reality, but primarily as a practice or act, a response to a social situation. It is a perspective which deconstructs the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic, between literary form and social content.

When the political is regarded as a special literary act, a certain advantage over the binaries of ideological critique is attained. The political can then be analyzed as at once literary and social, not merely the disruption of form within the literary text or the representation of political resistance, but an act which is inseparable from a social situation as well as the relation to other kinds of acts. The phenomenon that I refer to as a "virtual act" can be distinguished from the related concepts of "symbolic act" and "spiritual act".

When we read a text, and especially narrative, as a "symbolic act" we acknowledge in Fredric Jameson's words, what "is on the one hand affirmed as a genuine *act*, albeit on the symbolic level, while on the other it is regis tered as an act which is 'merely' symbolic, its reso lutions imaginary ones that leave the real untouched." If the symbolic act is also a "genuine" act, but still leaves the real untouched, it would follow, as in Jameson's argument, that the perfected symbolic act would result in the

repression of the political – a political unconscious. The symbolic act would have an entirely compensatory function. If, however, the symbolic act is read, not just as offering imaginary resolutions, but as modeling, in the act of reading, its extension in subsequent social practice, then this is a virtual act that can also have a genuine political character. That is to say that literature can offer norms for thought and action that are assumed in reading, and that remain effective beyond reading to the extent that they have become internalized. Whether this virtual act is read as symptomatic or exemplary depends, of course, on the political position of the reader.

J. Hillis Miller describes the social function of literature in much the same terms:

> [R]eading is an incarnated as well as a spiritual act. [. . .] Though literature refers to the real world, however, and though reading is a material act, literature uses [. . .] physical embedment to create or reveal alternative realities. These then enter back into the ordinary "real" world by way of readers whose belief and behavior are changed by reading – sometimes for the better, perhaps sometimes not. We see the world through the literature we read [. . .] We then act in the real world on the basis of that seeing" (*On Literature.* New York: Routledge, 2002. p 20).

But the difference in meaning between "virtual" and "spiritual" is significant. Although Miller also uses the term "virtual act", his belief that the alternative world that a text evokes has an ideal existence is

consistent with the reference in the passage just quoted to incarnation and spirit.

In concluding this presentation of political acts and others, which has essentially been a mapping of different theoretical positions, I wish to note especially that there is a variety of literary acts--symbolic (along with imaginary), virtual, and spiritual. An inquiry into this variety seems promising. Though it will have to wait for another occasion, I can observe from my own present perspective that the virtual acts of my four textual examples all have a political dimension. The aestheticism of *Madame Bovary* derives, not from political detachment and neutrality but from ambivalence. Tony Morrison's critique of modernist aestheticism as inadequate to African American experience and articulation of an African American aesthetics is also a political critique focused on race and ethnicity.

The implicit critique of politics, or at least its conspicuous avoidance, and preference of the ethical perspective in *Disgrace* is focused on how the staging of a public confession is at once unethical and bad politics. By contrast with the verbal artifice of a confession that aspires to the truth, the genuinely ethical emerges in the development of a character who by any standards strikes us as clearly immoral when we first make his acquaintance. Yet this treatment ethics and politics is not so different from that of Herman Melville, in whose novella we find an utter skepticism with liberal morality and innocent complaisance, a conviction that human relations are essentially political in the sense of being constituted as relations of power.

Certainly there remains more to be said on the broad subject I have taken up in this short presentation. It seems clear, however, that in certain distinguished literary texts we find a political dimension that overlaps with the aesthetic, as well as implying an ethical dimension that implies the political. Perhaps it is the case that the reverse is not true, that the political does not always imply the ethical, as in Melville's dark moral skepticism, yet there is the fact of the literary text itself and its intentionality. To write is to write for someone, for the purpose of being read, and in a certain way. Even Melville's darkness opens on the reader, engages in a virtual act that asks for the commitment of the reader, an ethical premise. It is tempting to speculate that the beautiful, the good, and the just involve three relations of increasing separation of self and other, and three three different kinds of temporality, together comprising the virtual act: the beautiful as immediacy and end in itself; the good as displacement of the interest of self and other; and the just as a future of universal equality.