



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S5. The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960s

Thursday 31 August: 2.30-4.30pm & 5.00-7.00pm

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Humanist critics contend that only realist texts have an ethical function, that there is no ethical message behind the parodic and self-conscious games played by experimental fiction and that, since emotion neutralises the ethical faculties, there is no ethical dimension in such excessive postmodernist genres as kitsch, melodrama or romance. However, one may argue that the defamiliarization imposed by parody, self-consciousness and emotional excessiveness on the realistic text involves some sort of criticism of received truths. This seminar will examine analytical evidence for the ethical component in key experimental British novels from the 1960s until the present.

Session 1

Ethics and experimentation in *House Mother Normal* (1971) by B. S. Johnson

Vanessa Guignery (University of Paris 4 Sorbonne)

Taking into account B. S. Johnson's uncompromising theoretical position in regard to fiction and truth, this paper will focus on *House Mother Normal*, a novel which combines formal innovation with an insightful reflection on deficiency, decay, normality and the way society deals with elderly people. Following ethicists in the Levinasian tradition and drawing from the analysis of Andrew Gibson and Adam Zachary Newton, I will endeavour to show how the defamiliarization of conventional modes in this novel does not exclude ethics, but on the contrary opens up new ethical dimensions, in particular an ethics of truth, an ethics of dissolution and an ethics of alterity.

The Subversive Power of Postmodern Fiction: the Case of Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*

Eveline Kilian (University of Göttingen)

My paper focuses on Brigid Brophy's novel *In Transit* (1969), an early and highly experimental example of postmodern fiction in Britain. The novel presents a whole range of linguistic experiments that explode our categories of perception and our systems of classification. These are mainly, though not exclusively, directed at subverting our

conception of fixed gender categories. My argument is that it is precisely through its relentless deconstruction and debunking of received notions and categories that *In Transit* fulfils a number of ethical purposes: It reveals the structuring and restrictive power of the gender order and at the same time suggests means to destabilize it, thus opening up the field for a greater variety and flexibility of subject and gender positions.

Shakespeare's Pastoral Romance: *The Tempest* and the Ethics of John Fowles's Novel *The Magus*

Elena Andonova-Kalapsazova (South-Western University of Blagoevgrad)

The paper is an attempt to explore the ways in which the articulation of a vision of ethics in John Fowles's novel *The Magus* and the hypertextual transposition of Shakespeare's pastoral romance *The Tempest* in the novel are tied in a relationship of mutual interdependence. The analysis proceeds along a line of first substantiating the claim that the play is indeed a major hypotextual presence in the novel and then going on to sketch the process in which the novel simultaneously undermines an aestheticised escapist pastoral frame of reference or the interpretative strategy that tends to read pastoral this way, and reinvigorates pastoral by making it a vehicle for an ethics that has noticeably postmodern premises.

Ethics and Metafictional Biography

Lena Steveker (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg)

As metafictional biographies, A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and *The Biographe's Tale* are literary experiments in the genre of biography. Questioning the possibility of biographical accuracy and historical objectivity, they revolve around the problem of biographical 'truth'. While emphasising the importance of biographical imagination, both novels discuss imagination as a potentially appropriating act in which the biographer runs the risk of subjecting the biographee to her/his own perspective. The novels differentiate between respectful and disrespectful biographical imagination, thus establishing 'respect' as an ethical category which regards the biographee as an 'other', a totally separate individual.

Female Sacrifice and Gender Violence in A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*: an Ethical Perspective

Marta Cerezo Moreno (National Distance Learning University of Spain)

This study analyses Byatt's *Babel Tower* as a novel which both appropriates and rewrites traditional all-male sacrificial theories. On the one hand, Lady Mavis, Frederica and Lady Roseace act as self-sacrificers and scapegoats who are only allowed to enter the social realm by means of what Kristeva calls a "sacrificial contract". On the other hand, Frederica's resistance to both a domestic and a judicial sacrificial process, and her refusal to play the role of sacrificial victim question and destabilize the inner mechanisms of patriarchal impositions. Frederica unveils how the manipulating power of narratives and the essential role of language in the sacrificial act proclaim an ethics of oneness and fusion that should be replaced by an ethics of separateness and difference.

Session 2

On the Limits of the Ethical: the Emotional Attitude in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *Hawksmoor*

Jakob Winnberg (Blekinge Institute of Technology)

This paper argues that because, rather than in spite, of their representations of an emotional attitude focused on egological affects, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *Hawksmoor* are profoundly ethical. Because these novels are so ethically troubling, they have a strong ethical function—not since they provide models of conduct or exemplary instances of engagement with the other, but since they occasion a reconsideration of what, if any, the limits of the ethical are. The ethical component in these novels does not take the form of an ethical *message*, but of an ethical *challenge*. My paper charts the renegotiation occasioned by this challenge.

Experimental Fiction and the Ethics of a Verité: the Encounter with the Other in Martin Amis's *Night Train*

María Jesús Martínez Alfaro (University of Zaragoza)

This paper focuses on Martin Amis's *Night Train*, a metaphysical detective novel that deliberately and self-consciously manipulates the conventions of classical detective fiction. My analysis traces parallels between the detective's encounter with a most atypical case in the diegesis (the puzzling suicide of Jennifer Rockwell) and the reader's encounter with a not less atypical detective novel. Both of these encounters are approached as dramatising an encounter of the self with the other. It is my contention that they can be interpreted in the light of Levinas' notion of ethics as a disenchantment of subjectivity involving a movement from reduction to irreducibility: from the attempts to "capture" and "apprehend" the other (Jennifer/ the novel) to the revelation that the possibility of "possessing" the other is a delusion—but one that can be ethically, and artistically, enriching.

Unravelling Conventions; or, the Ethics of Deconstruction: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Angeles de la Concha (National Distance-Learning University of Spain)

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* deals with wrongdoing, repentance and reparation and, as such, the issue of ethics lies at its heart. My aim in this paper is to read the novel in the light of the relationship between ethics and the process of representation. For this purpose I shall explore first, the violence exerted by narrative formal conventions in the search of truth. Second, the way conventions such as class, gender and morality operate to construe and exclude the other. Finally, I shall argue for a postmodern ethics that by deconstructing these conventions, laying bare the injustice they sustain, may open the way for a reshaped *common pursuit* yet to be formulated.

Experiments with Ethics in Contemporary British Fiction: The Lack of a Stable Framework

Vera Nünning (University of Heidelberg)

The proposed paper challenges the assumption that, as far as British writing at the beginning of the 21st century is concerned, experimental writing is synonymous with postmodernist writing. It is argued that two novels by Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, both published in 2005, achieve indeterminacy and evoke the experience of alterity by using seemingly 'traditional' narrative conventions, thus opening up new ways for the exploration of ethical concerns in contemporary fiction.

How Good are Zadie Smith's Characters? Ethics, Identity Narratives and Materialist Realism in *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*

Jonathan P. A. Sell (University of Alcalá)

This paper argues that the aesthetic and ethical criteria of 'idealist mimesis' are inadequate to describe much contemporary fiction, which is actually predicated on a 'materialist mimesis'. More particularly, it takes issue with those philosophers of identity and critics alike who, subscribing to the metaphor according to which a subject's life is a narrative, assume that good narratives and therefore good lives have identifiable goals and recognisable, coherent forms. Zadie Smith's novels demonstrate, first, that 'materialist realism' can be ethical and, second, that messy lives with messy narratives are not necessarily bad lives, which is itself an insight of ethical value.

Form is Content: Michele Roberts' novel *Daughters of the House*

Vesela Katsarova (University of Sofia)

The focus of my paper is on the interdependence between the ethical component and the experimental narrative techniques in such a key novel as Michele Roberts' *Daughters of the House* which was shortlisted for 1992 Booker Prize and won the WH Smith Literary Award. The claim of humanist critics that only realist texts have an ethical component is far from true. The British novelist Michele Roberts boldly experiments with form but is also deeply preoccupied with moral issues. She contends that form and content are so tightly interwoven that it is hard to separate them.