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# The Ethics of Interpretation and the International Division of Intellectual Labor<sup>1</sup>

*Idelber Avelar*

To Alberto Moreiras

Much of the work produced in recent years on the relationship between ethics and literature has responded to two major concerns: on the one hand, the possible or desirable role of literature as a source for ethical theory (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*; Williams; McIntyre) and, on the other, the contribution of ethically-informed perspectives to the understanding of literature (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*; Booth; Parker; Newton). Philosophers in search of alternative models of ethical agency have found much from which to profit in the examination of literature, especially prose fiction, and in parallel fashion ethically-oriented critics have added a new dimension to their interpretive task by incorporating the philosophical tradition of ethical inquiry, especially the Kantian and post-Kantian. However, on both sides of the disciplinary divide the dialogue with the developments of literary theory in the past decades has been, to say the least, problematic. Viewed with suspicion by both moral philosophers and ethical critics, contemporary literary theory is often cast as responsible for the bracketing of ethical concerns in literary studies. The purpose of this article is to map out this unhappy marriage between ethics and literary theory by inquiring into the conception of ethics entailed by the claim that critical theory has been oblivious to ethical concerns. Since this stems at least partially from a confrontation between various national traditions, philosophical and otherwise, and since ethical issues are increasingly being played out on an international arena, I will recast the problem within what I am calling "the international division of intellectual labor," an asymmetrical and hierarchical distribution of cognitive positions among different countries and regions of the globe. This will be argued primarily through the reading of a story by Jorge Luis Borges, which will place the ethical discussion in a pedagogical context, thus bringing me back to the potential contribution of critical theory to the formulation of an ethics of literary studies responsive to the aforementioned division of labor.

A number of recent studies have offered the picture of a return, with a vengeance, of ethical criticism. After supposedly being obscured by a host

of methods oblivious to ethical concerns, the inquiry into the ethical powers of literature has become again, we are told, a central concern for literary studies. Leona Toker finds “the reasons for the temporary eclipse of ethical criticism in the second half of the twentieth century” (xi) in “the widespread disillusionment with the traditional moral values—in the wake of the Nazi crimes, or those of the Gulag, or the unhealed wounds and unanswered questions of Vietnam” (xiii). Introducing a chapter on the “resurgence” of ethical criticism entitled “the return of the repressed,” David Parker notes “the virtual absence of explicit ethical interest in contemporary literary discourse” (4), a vacuum filled by moral philosophers whose work would testify that “literary studies can no longer ignore the ethical without yielding up a once central part of its intellectual responsibility and constituency to other disciplines” (4). Martha Nussbaum, herself one of the philosophers quoted by Parker, has identified an “absence, from literary theory, of the organizing questions of moral philosophy, and of moral philosophy’s sense of urgency about these questions” (*Love’s Knowledge* 170). Of the conflation presupposed by many of these texts between the ethical dimension of literary studies, whether present or absent, and the concerns of moral philosophy, especially in the forms canonical in US philosophy departments, I will attempt to say something later. For now let me underscore that the examples of a narrative of decline and a (more or less successful and widespread) return of the ethical could be multiplied (Booth 25-27). As the reader will have inferred from my tone, I view such narratives with a good deal of skepticism. From Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, all of them thinkers of the return, I would for the moment like to retain the notion that a return is never a simple re-emerging from absence into presence, that what returns may in fact have been there all along, or that the return may be another name for its becoming something else.

Deconstruction in particular and post-phenomenological thought in general<sup>2</sup> occupy a central position in such apocalyptic narratives about the place of ethics in literary studies: “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” (Siebers 2). Siebers does not demonstrate the point, but the reader is led to assume that the displacement of the sovereign humanist subject and its inscription in a textual / political / libidinal field that exceeds it (what I take him to mean by “subordinating selfhood to linguistic structure”) equals the demise of the ethical. If one can no longer think of “responsibility” and “moral decision” in the terms one once did, it follows that a new theoretical barbarism has replaced our good

old ethics. In fact, much of the rhetoric surrounding literary theory's supposed abandonment of the ethical tends to construe the problem by assigning to universalist humanism and its offspring in moral philosophy an exclusive monopoly on ethics, while ignoring the powerful ethical motifs—as well as the challenges to all moralistic philosophies—raised not only by post-phenomenological thought, but also by transdisciplinary inquiries into subjectivity such as psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism, and race studies. My note of skepticism is germane to the central concern of this article: the definition of what qualifies as an ethically valenced inquiry is considerably overdetermined by national boundaries. In fact, much of the ambiguity surrounding the phenomenon stems from a rift between, on the one hand, what has come to be called “critical theory”—the fundamental epistemological claims of which are predicated on modern continental philosophy—and on the other, the considerable resistance it has raised in the US literary and, especially, philosophical establishments.<sup>3</sup>

However one views the role of ethics in literary studies, a prominent position must be accorded to Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*, a crucial work in what has been construed as a resurgence in ethical criticism. Booth holds the seemingly contradictory claims that ethical criticism “fell on hard times” - “it goes unmentioned in most discussions among professional critics” (25)—and that “just about everybody on our scene is an ‘ethical’ critic” (67), in the sense that aesthetic and epistemological stances will always include, if implicitly, ethical choices. Booth's challenge to the Kantian separation between moral and aesthetic philosophy thus echoes Hegel's, who had showed how an “ought to” lurked behind every “is” in the Kantian definitions of the beautiful and the sublime. What Booth's work deplores is the lack of explicit clarification of the values underlying even the most specialized aesthetic analyses—hence the contention that ethics often “goes unmentioned.” In his attempt to fill this gap Booth makes a compelling case for the humanist project of enlightenment through letters: “a Conversation Celebrating the Many Ways in Which Narratives Can Be Good for You—with Side-Glances at How to Avoid Their Powers for Harm” (ix), as he defines it. Taking distance from the prescriptivism of much moral philosophy and aligning himself with an entire tradition that has dissolved the commonly accepted equivalence between the *moral* and the *ethical*, Booth shows how the reflection on the encounter between a text's or an implied author's ethos and that of the reader cannot be subsumed under a set of norms. “[P]ostponing most questions about good and bad *morality*, in every ordinary sense,” Booth stresses that “*ethical* distinctions do not depend on choices between traditional *moral* virtues” (179). Aware that moral condemnations

by earlier ethical critics, from Plato to Leavis, “gave ethical criticism a bad name,” Booth poses the question: “Can we hope to find a criticism that can respect variety and offer knowledge about why some fictions are worth more than others?” (36).

An attempt to ground the latter claim—that indeed some fictions are worth more than others—could only dispense with an implicit morality by resorting to an investigation of historical processes through which values *have been assigned* to those fictions. Otherwise, if one takes those values to be intrinsic, either “potentially” or “actually” present—as Booth attempts to distinguish when faced with the problem (89)—one could not possibly “respect variety” other than by refusing to take one’s ethical position to its necessary logical conclusion, i.e. the advocacy of those values *over* others that are “worth less.” The thorny problem reflects a relationship of overdetermination: readers who have grappled with Booth’s admirable work have noticed a subterranean dialogue with contemporary theory, even if it is only at times explicitly foregrounded—as, for example, in the reassessment of Rabelais in the light of feminism (383-418). His challenge is to maintain some insights of contemporary theory, say, on the historical variability of meaning, or the impossibility of a transcendental measure of value, and thus keep at bay all moralism, while at the same time holding on to the notion of literature as a unique provider of a “submersion in other minds” (142) that provokes a “range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self’” (8), namely “the Good” or “the Harm” alluded to in his preface. *Company* is then a painstaking effort to define what this “Good” and “Harm” would consist of, in an attempt to accept variability of interpretations (which Booth defends in the name of “pluralism”) while refusing to shift the ground from intrinsic value to social valuation. Booth accomplishes the task with the help of a number of exercises in *reductio ad absurdum*, such the contrast between *King Lear* and an issue of *Hustler*, or a Yeats poem and an improvised joke in verse. After morally overcoming these strawmen, great literature emerges unscathed, reassured of its morally edifying function.

Booth’s model is, then, pedagogical, in the broader sense that the ethical moment is placed in the “effect” exerted by the text. One can see how this model is at odds with the anti-humanist strain of contemporary criticism, which conceives of literature as a linguistic, cultural, and historical construct whose value can only be determined through a more agnostic, distanced perspective *vis-à-vis* any given content in the text, be it inherent or potential. The need to walk the tight rope between his acknowledgment of formal and historical contingencies and his humanist commitment leads Booth

incessantly to hammer home the book's main pluralist point: what is good here is not good there, it may be good for you but not for me, any virtue pushed too hard may destroy the others, too much of any value (be it irony, formal openness, what not) may be harmful rather than good, etc. (49-79). The bulk of *Company* is devoted to coming to terms with divergent responses to texts, and, therefore, these texts' various ethical dimensions in each situation. Booth does as good a job as anyone in making room for all the determinations weighing upon that evaluative act—those arising from the reader, from textual ambiguities, from the interpretive community in which the encounter takes place, etc. The entire third chapter, "The 'Logic' of Evaluative Criticism," strives for that middle ground, the sensible gray area that would allow the critic to avoid "Universal Syllogisms" (this work is good because it possesses X; therefore all works that possess X. . .) while not renouncing the claim of an intrinsic ethical value of literature, and of some works of literature over others. The goal is to avoid the "risks" of too much "closure" and too much "openness." The misgivings of ethical criticism are then liable to being explained by its special temptation to "overgeneralize" (51), a middle-of-the-road solution for a pluralism that still equates the ethical with an inherent value that, however variable, always transcends the conflicts of social valuation.

The minute one poses the problem as one of overgeneralization, the ground is set for the conscientious liberal to search for the reasonable compromise. Despite Booth's claims (350), we are before a liberal, not a radical pluralism. Speaking of contemporary criticism, he affirms that "the resulting emphasis on the variety of interpretations tells us little about the actual value of the works" (84).<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on the social variability of interpretation only obscures the question of value if one clings to the notion that works possess value as inherent property, eternal essence, i.e. if one refuses to consider seriously the argument on contingent, historically variable processes of value assignation, a theoretical position that Booth discards as "subjectivist" (73). The attacks on "subjectivism" and "relativism" from the standpoint of humanist ethics are well-known and Booth rehearses them in his work: "[a] complete equivalence in the competence of all interpreters is clearly entailed by the claim that works do not *possess* or *exercise* inherent value, but are only *valued*" (85). Here is another version of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith has termed the egalitarian fallacy, "the recurrent anxiety / charge / claim ... that, unless one judgment can be said or shown to be more 'valid' than another, then all judgments must be 'equal' or 'equally valid'" (98). The egalitarian fallacy often rests on a Robinson Crusoe-type fantasy:

"It is a bit harder to believe ... that if a person in our culture who is completely inexperienced in literature sees no value in, say, Faulkner's novels, his or her opinion is as pertinent to our discourse about Faulkner as the opinions of experienced readers" (Booth 85). The fallacy is that, of course, a "person" "completely inexperienced in literature" would not belong to the same "our culture" as "experienced readers" and therefore his/her claims could not be as pertinent to "our discourse" (one should always ask, as deconstruction and Marxism have taught us, what enunciative instance hides behind a first-person plural). In fact it is *precisely because* not all judgments are equal that values are never intrinsic, self-identical, but rather articulated through conflictive social interactions. It is exactly because valuations are not only not equally valid epistemically but also not on equal footing within power relations that they are never interchangeable. One or the other is never a matter of indifference, contrary to the essentialist anxiety that if valuation has been shifted away from a dormant immanence to a network of social relations all values have somehow become equal to all others.<sup>5</sup>

The central metaphor of Booth's work is, however, that of friendship, in what is roughly an Aristotelian model of the text-reader encounter: "my chief responsibility to myself as storyteller is fulfilled when I choose to create an implied author who qualifies as my friend" (129). The relationship is predicated on a number of actions characteristically construed by a certain philosophical tradition as "human:" texts "invite," "tolerate" or "reject" a given response; they create a reciprocal or hierarchic relationship with the reader; they are "reserved" or "intimate," etc. (169-98). In order to make the text an ethical agent, one anthropomorphizes it. Only insofar as texts have somehow become "human" can one respond to them ethically. As Adam Zachary Newton has pointed out, despite all the talk about narrators and implied authors, what is at stake here is an author-centered and ultimately unidirectional model (65). This explains Booth's emphasis on "assent," "surrender," "succumbing" as preconditions for the encounter with fiction. Instead of the ethical constituting a possibility of questioning the attributes ideologically assigned to human nature, those attributes themselves are made to engulf the ethical encounter. As opposed to, say, the tradition of ethical thought that culminates in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the ethical encounter—the response to the call of the Other—is prior to any anthropological content one could construe, to any possible definition of "the human," Booth implicitly aligns himself with the tradition that subordinates ethics to a humanist anthropology. Instead of locating ethics at the text's foundation, its sustaining ground—thus opening the possibility

that the text interrupts one's identity with oneself, including one's self-assurance about "human nature"—Booth's model eliminates all alterity from the text, turning it into another "human," which word remains, of course, unquestioned. The anthropomorphization of the text serves the clear purpose of eliminating its alterity. Hence the necessity of the friendship model. Get rid of the anthropocentric premise, and the ethics falls apart.

Assumptions about human nature also govern much of what moral philosophers have said about literature, as in Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelianism, which looks to literature for new ways of posing the ethical question: how should one live? (*Love's Knowledge* 168-94). Literature is for her a privileged space to renew ethical inquiry while preserving the complexity of particular situations and the role of emotions and affects in all ethical choices. As the autobiographical moments of *Love's Knowledge* make clear, Nussbaum had to work against the grain of mainstream American philosophy in order to establish literature as a legitimate field of philosophical investigation. Confronting a moral philosophy dominated by Utilitarianism and Kantianism, "both positions that were, for good internal reasons, hostile to literature" (13), Nussbaum also had to face an approach to ancient philosophy that did not take "the ethical contribution of literary works ... to be a part of Greek ethical thought as such—but, at most, a part of the background of 'popular thought' against which the great thinkers worked" (14). Elaborating an alternative to this position has meant, for Nussbaum, the crafting of an ethical stance much more attentive to particulars than mainstream, normative moral philosophy would admit.

Since my purpose here is to foreground the international division of intellectual labor, I will simply refer the reader to Nussbaum's elegant analysis of Greek literature, Henry James, Beckett, etc.,<sup>6</sup> and focus instead on her perception of contemporary literary theory and on a recent piece of hers on patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Much like Booth's, Nussbaum's intervention in the debate is framed by the perception of a "pressure of the current thought that to discuss a text's ethical or social content is somehow to neglect 'textuality,' . . . ; and of the related, though more extreme, thought that texts do not refer to human life at all, but only to other texts and to themselves" (170). The supporting evidence offered by Nussbaum of this "pressure of current thought" does not cite any critical theorist, but refers to an article by Arthur Danto which makes the same claim, again without any serious engagement with contemporary theory. The quibbling over evidence would not matter much were it not indicative of a common pattern of reception of critical theory, especially of its post-phenomenological branches: the accusation that it has relegated "human" concerns when so much of its

thrust has been exactly to delimit the historical and geographic scope of the notion of "the human," its by-no-means universal applicability and underlying philosophical assumptions. The critique of humanism cannot be subsumed under a putative disregard for "human" concerns, precisely because such critique has radically altered the meaning of this philosopheme; the inquiry into the conditions of possibility under which a human essence has been imagined can hardly be taken as a dismissal of the problem of the "human." In other words, when Michel Foucault shows that man is a recent invention (250-387), coextensive with the emergence of the domains of life (when biology takes the place of natural history), language (when linguistics replaces general grammar), and labor (when political economy succeeds the analysis of wealth), his contention is that the realm of "the human" is not one of an unchanging universal essence, but a very particular construct of a historically situated culture. Likewise, when Jacques Derrida deconstructively probes into post-War humanism in France, the emphasis is on the fact that "although the theme of history is quite present in the discourse of the period, there is little practice of the history of concepts. For example, the history of the concept of man is never examined" (116). The same naturalized, taken-for-granted approach to notions such as "the human" or "morality" lies at the basis of the anxious attacks on critical theory's "abandonment" of human or moral concerns.

To be sure, Nussbaum does admit exceptions to her picture of a textualist literary theory hostile to "human" concerns: "clearly, feminist criticism and Marxist criticism are major exceptions to the situation described here. But they are, in their difference from and frequent opposition to what surrounds them, exceptions that prove the rule" (171). If it were not troublesome enough to identify immense sub-fields of contemporary theory like feminism or Marxism as "exceptions" to anything, it would suffice to underscore that the multifaceted polemics in which feminists and Marxists have been involved cannot be construed as involving the presence of ethical concerns on one side and their absence on the other. Based on what presumably their exceptionality consists of, one could easily show that race studies, queer theory, and post-colonial criticism, to mention only three obvious examples, also partake of the very same ethical impulse. One would thus not be far from concluding that what Nussbaum refers to as ethical "exceptions" in contemporary literary criticism is nothing but . . . the field of contemporary literary criticism itself!

Related in a number of ways to Nussbaum's work in ethical theory is her recent call for an educational cosmopolitanism that would instruct children to follow Diogenes and the Stoics in thinking of themselves first of

all as “citizens of the world,” rather than members of any ethnic or national group. The “worthy moral ideals of justice and equality” are best served, Nussbaum argues, by “the cosmopolitan, the person whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings” (“Patriotism” 4). Much of Nussbaum’s emphasis is pedagogical, as she goes on to argue that students in the US must “learn to recognize humanity wherever they encounter it, undeterred by traits that are strange to them, and be eager to understand humanity in all its strange guises” (9), a cosmopolitan pedagogy that can only be welcomed. Certainly, making “the imaginative leap into the life of the other” (132), striving for a “state of things in which all of the differences will be nonhierarchically understood” (138), and making “all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern,” (9) are noble goals, but the trouble begins when one asks in whose terms the dialogue will occur. For it is far from obvious that there is a universal, neutral language in which this dialogue could be conducted.

In fact, Nussbaum’s argument itself shows how much in the liberal cosmopolitan’s benevolence is composed of unexamined ethnocentric assumptions. Her starting point is Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World*, where a cosmopolitan landlord, who supposedly “transcends” divisions of race, gender, and class, is finally defeated by the political forces that Nussbaum identifies with “nationalism and ethnocentrism” (“Patriotism” 5). In dividing the camps in this fashion, she ignores that the “reasonable and principled cosmopolitanism” represented by the *landlord* Nikhil—that particular brand of humanist liberalism often embraced by colonial and post-colonial elites—bears the unmistakable mark of one class. More consideration of the politics embodied by humanist liberalism in colonial situations, such as the one found in the work of the Subaltern Studies group, would have given Nussbaum extensive evidence that “there is an affinity between the imperialist subject and the subject of humanism” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 202).<sup>7</sup> This link is based, I hasten to add, not on any contingency or correctable lapse in the implementation of the humanist project, but rather on its very foundation, so that it would make no sense to differentiate between its universal “essence” and flawed actualization. Hence the falsity of the claim that the decline of Tagore’s ideal “now threatens the very existence of a secular and tolerant Indian state” (16), for colonial elites were never a model of universalist tolerance when it came to extending the definition of “the human” to those located below them in the social pyramid. Likewise, it is misleading to move from the Indian example to say that “Americans have frequently supported the principle of *Bande Mataram* [“Hail

Motherland," the slogan of the nationalist movement in Tagore's novel, *I.A.*], giving the fact of being American a special salience" (3), as though it made no difference to be a nationalist in a colonized country or in an imperial world power, i.e. as though each given "Motherland's" position within the international hierarchy were a matter of indifference. To apply the word "ethnocentric" equally to US disregard for other cultures and to a nationalist movement in India—whatever the latter's limitations—masks the crucial fact that one of these "ethnocentrism," namely the former, partakes in the hierarchical distribution of power among nations that made the latter "ethnocentrism" possible, inevitable, and perhaps indeed necessary after all. To put it differently, does Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism make room for the difference between the US nationalism that justified the 10-year-long onslaught of the Nicaraguan Revolution in the name of national security and Nicaragua's defensive nationalism against foreign aggression? It does not seem like it. As Judith Butler argued in her comment on Nussbaum's piece (unfortunately ignored by Nussbaum in her reply), "what constitutes the community that might qualify as a legitimate community that might debate and agree upon this universality? If that very community is constituted through racist exclusions, how shall we trust it to deliberate on the question of racist speech?" (49).

The benevolent liberal proposes a "global dialogue" and stresses that "we need knowledge not only of the geography and ecology of other nations ... but also [need to know] a great deal about their people, so that in talking with them we may be capable of respecting their traditions and commitments" (12), but never considers the potential contradiction: what if "respect" for "other traditions and commitments" requires renouncing the project of a global dialogue in the terms in which it has been posed? What if the definition of "human personhood" as "the possession of practical reason and other basic moral capacities" (133) clashes with a notion of humanity elaborated by groups who have endured one catastrophe after another and been led by experience to define "human personhood" as, say, "the possession of the infinite capacity to inflict pain"? What is the language in which the negotiation between these two definitions of humanity can take place?

When exemplifying how cosmopolitanism does not preclude a commitment to one's particular situation, Nussbaum takes the case of mother tongues:

A useful analogy is one's native language. I love the English language. And although I have some knowledge of some other languages, whatever I express of myself in the world I express in English. If I were to try to equalize my command of even five or six languages and do a little writing

in each, I would write poorly. But this doesn't mean that I think English is intrinsically superior to other languages. I recognize that all human beings have an innate linguistic capacity, and that any person might have learned any language; which language one learns is in that sense morally irrelevant. ("Reply" 136)

The passage is intended as an argument for the non-contradiction between commitment to universalism and embeddedness in the particular, but it says considerably more than that. Nussbaum's choice of the English language as her example of a particular is revealing, for English is rapidly becoming a particular that can lay claim to a quasi-universality in several fields. In this sense, her argument suffers from obliviousness to everything that makes the various particulars not only different but also hierarchically organized. For Nussbaum's point loses its force when one considers that her option for monolingualism in English implicitly assumes that the same option is open to speakers of all other particular languages. And here is the fallacy of universalist humanism. Monolingualism in Quechua is not an option available to the intellectual from the Peruvian hills, much as monolingualism in Maya is not a possibility to the Guatemalan or Southern Mexican intellectual. It is not an option to Hungarians or Brazilians who wish to argue *their* conceptions of universality in any international forum. If it is obviously true that languages are morally irrelevant in the banal sense that no language is intrinsically superior to any other, it is never *politically* irrelevant which language one speaks, for only in the hegemonic languages is it structurally possible to ignore this political determination over the struggle around morals. Gayatri Spivak has made this point most compellingly: "it is only in the hegemonic languages that the benevolent do not take the limits of their often uninstructed good will into account. That phenomenon becomes hardest to fight because the individuals involved in it are genuinely benevolent and you are identified as a trouble-maker" ("Politics" 191).

My purpose with the critiques of Nussbaum and Booth is not to deliver attacks on first-rate thinkers from whom I have learned a great deal. It is, rather, to highlight the limits of well-meaning first-world liberalism in dealing with ethical questions in an international context. The premises that govern their texts are indicative, I believe, of a fundamental crisis for ethical theory: how to formulate universal imperatives in a time when the most vigilant and critical brands of philosophical thought have convincingly unveiled the *particular* allegiances of the available notions of *universality*? Wouldn't the first task of an ethical theory elaborated in the dominant nations and cultures be the inclusion of its own position of privilege into the

conceptual horizon to be analyzed, an inquiry that could provide a glimpse into the ways in which its own universalism may in fact be a rather particular province, i.e. the “village of the liberal managerial class” (Pinsky 87)? If the birth of a modern morality that conceived of itself as universal was inseparable from the assumption of a “civilizing mission” of the “most advanced” nations (Bauman 39-43), could one not hypothesize that this tradition finds a home today in the benevolent managerial liberalism that believes it can propose an ethics inclusive of the Other—i.e. an ethics truly universal, like any ethics worthy of the name—without modifying the terms in which this universality has been formulated?

The crisis of the universal has left humanist ethics permanently on the verge of catachresis—that is, as a metaphor “for which no *historically* adequate referent can be advanced” (Spivak, “Scattered” 281). Therefore, when disenfranchised groups set out to critique existing notions of universality they cannot but engage in what Judith Butler has called a “‘performative contradiction:’ claiming to be covered by that universal, they thereby expose the contradictory character of the previous conventional formulations of the universal” (48). The very notion of responsibility, central in all ethical theory, would then have to be rethought in the light of the crisis of humanist universality. If “responsibility annuls the call to which it seeks to respond” (Spivak, “Responsibility” 19), it is because the critique of the universal has unveiled the constitutive paradox of all ethics since Kant. In order to be ethics at all, it must take the form of a universal imperative embodied in a free individual choice, a singular and uncoerced embrace of this imperative. But the individual acceptance of the imperative would, of course, insofar as it is truly individual and uncoerced, be in contradiction with its universal applicability. The paradox of a free acceptance of a universal law was, as Zygmunt Bauman has shown, the oxymoronic way out of the dilemma between the postulate of an innate human rationality and the need for a legislative philosophical elite to promote and guard the morality of actions (16-28).<sup>8</sup> Variations on this aporia underlie moral philosophers’ and moralistic critics’ claims that deconstruction and other branches of post-phenomenological thought “disregard ethical questions.” For these critics the ethical is to be found in the treatment of the content of moral values (the peroration over how moral it is to do X or avoid Y), whereas deconstruction shows that it is the *formal* structure of a demand, the Other’s *call* to responsiveness that makes ethics possible, prior to and constitutive of the definitions one may ascribe to good or evil, desirable or undesirable modes of valuation or behavior.<sup>9</sup>

I started my discussion of the ethical implications of the international division of labor with an exploration of two of today's most erudite humanist critics as an attempt to shed light on a particular trait of the US literary and philosophical scenes: there are strong appeals to ethics both by right-wing protectors of "Western values" against the "nihilism" of critical theory (a phenomenon that deserves a separate analysis—one of our ethical tasks)<sup>10</sup> and, on the other hand, by a number of liberal humanists, philosophers or literati, who have confronted, with varying degrees of good faith and success, the challenges of critical theory. If I focus on the latter rather than the former, it is because liberal humanism often comes across as the only ethically valenced alternative to the conservative hysteria about the demise of "Western values." This is so not because contemporary theory has been oblivious to ethics—as some of its critics, Nussbaum and Booth included, would have it—but because post-humanist ethics still needs to formulate a metacritical account of its own position in an *international academic market characterized by a heavy dissymmetry among its agents*. This is task that benevolent liberalism, due to its unexamined universalism, is structurally precluded from carrying out. In other words, I do not believe that the ethical has been absent in contemporary theory—on the contrary, I agree with Fredric Jameson that it is the dominant mode of criticism of our times (*Political* 59). But the formulation of such an ethical dimension still needs to: 1) contest right-wing stereotypes about the death of the West in the mass media, en route to creating conditions for a serious discussion about the role of the humanities in today's university; 2) expose the ethnocentric nature of a liberal humanism that cannot accept the critique of inherent, intrinsic self-identical values and misconstrues all theories of social processes of valuation as "relativism" and "subjectivism;" and 3) accomplish the previous two without falling into facile assumptions about the necessarily democratizing potential of the current critique of universalism.

There is no easy answer to these problems, but a pedagogical strategy that would force students to include their own positionality into their reflection on objects of study could place the discussion on a more fruitful terrain. With that goal in mind, I would like to stress the ethical potential of the deconstructive notion of undecidability when put to work in a pedagogical context. Since this notion has been under fire from a hasty morality that equates undecidability with omission, I will now turn to one of the most daring literary texts in its portrayal of the undecidable nature of the ethical encounter: Jorge Luis Borges's "The Ethnographer," a tale about a student's failure / success to read the Other. "The Ethnographer" tells the

story of Fred Murdock, a doctoral student in a US university, a young man at “that age when one still does not know who he is” (265).<sup>11</sup> In Murdock, the narrator tells us, “there was nothing singular, not even this feigned singularity proper to the young” (265). He was “respectful” and “did not disbelieve books or those who write books” (265). Uncertain about his research, he is advised to study indigenous languages: “his professor, an aged man, invited him to make his home in a reservation, observe the rites, and discover the secret revealed by the wizards to the initiated” (265).

This is, then, a story about anthropological legibility, an attempted encounter with otherness and the retranslation of that encounter back into the language of sameness, the doctoral dissertation Murdock is expected to write once he returns. Murdock’s ethnographic journey is at first a successful immersion in otherness:

For over two years he lived in the plains, between muddy walls or out in the open. He would get up before dawn, go to bed at dusk, and even dream in a tongue that was not that of his parents. He got used to savoring bitter tastes and covering himself with strange clothes. He forgot his friends and the city, and came to think in ways that his logic refused. During the first months of his learning he reservedly took notes that he would later tear up, perhaps not to arouse suspicion, perhaps because he no longer needed them. At the end of a time preestablished by some exercises of moral and physical nature, the priest ordered him to start remembering his dreams and entrust them to him at dawn. He verified that on nights of full moon he dreamt of bison. He entrusted these repeated dreams to his master and the master ended up revealing to him the secret doctrine. One morning, without saying good-bye to anybody, Murdock left. (266)

In this initial moment the story seems to confirm the possibility of a transparent legibility of the Other, if one just makes sure that all the protocols of an efficacious ethnography are followed. Murdock “becomes” one with the tribe in a utopian fusion with his object of study. His dreaming in another language offers the seemingly definitive proof that the great divide had been overcome. As the ending of the story makes clear, however, his immersion in his object—the horizon of perfection for all anthropology—also represented the implosion of his research project.

Upon his puzzling return to the city following the revelation of the indigenous secret, Murdock visits his professor and “tells him that he knew the secret and had decided not to reveal it” (266). After being asked if he was bound by any oaths, or if the English language was inadequate to convey the secret, Murdock assures his professor that neither was his true reason, and that “now that I possess the secret I could utter it in a hundred different

and yet contradictory ways” and adds that “the secret, moreover, is not worth the paths that led me to it” (266). To the professor’s final question as to whether or not he now plans to live among the Indians, Murdock replies: “No. Maybe I’ll come back to the plains. What their men taught me applies [*vale*] anywhere and in any circumstance” (267). The narrator laconically closes the story saying that “Fred married, got divorced and is now a librarian at Yale” (267).

The difficulty of interpreting “The Ethnographer” stems from the very brevity of Borges’s language, the refusal to offer any anchoring points that could turn the story into a transparent parable. In that matter-of-fact tone characteristic of Borges’s narrators, the reader is confronted with a tale that prevents any moralization as to a “proper” way of approaching the wholly Other. Much of the fascination it provokes derives from its leaving unanswered the question that could make the text reducible to an ethical imperative: did Murdock return because he could now live, in the US, according to principles learned among the Indians (thus carrying and caring for the seeds of their teaching) or did he choose the detached-from-experience job of librarian at an elite university as a sign of a renunciation that ultimately canceled out the lessons learned on the journey? Moreover, who is in a position to decide, since the content of his learning remains shielded from the reader, presumably incommunicable in the language in which the story is written? Could it be that giving up the project of studying the Other was the very ethical content learned on the journey, and that in fact turning away from the Other, letting the Other be (as in the Heideggerian axiom for that most ethical of all tasks, “letting things be”), represented the only possibility of truly responding to the call of the Other? The remark that the secret was not, for him, worth the paths that led him to it suggests a primacy of experience over any attempt to translate it into knowledge. At any rate, the story highlights a fundamental incommensurability between the lesson learned in the tribe and the initial project of writing a dissertation about them. If we take this suggestion to be the structuring principle behind Murdock’s final choice, we would then be forced to admit that his giving up the dissertation is the locus of the ethical par excellence in the story. The ethical would then be expressed here only negatively, through an act of renunciation.

The rift that separates Murdock-turned-Indian and Murdock-the-ethnographer is the zone designated by the deconstructive notion of undecidability. It would be tiresome to list again all the scholarship that has attacked this concept in the name of a morality of action. It is more productive

to note how the Borges story rests upon the indissociability between Murdock's *successful* experience as an ethnographer and the impossibility of writing the dissertation. The story rests on undecidable grounds not because it is merely "ambiguous," as one would say in New Critical fashion, but because it establishes a *determinate* relationship—it may be worthwhile to stress again that undecidability has very little to do with "indeterminacy"—between the success of the journey (true knowledge of the Other) and the failure of the purposes behind the journey (a dissertation presenting the knowledge acquired). For Murdock there is then no simple choosing between the endotopic knowledge of his experience in the plains and the exotopic knowledge of the doctoral dissertation,<sup>12</sup> for if the former is initially thought of as a precondition for the latter, its successful completion preempts the very possibility of translating it into academic language.

I know of no story as efficacious for introducing students to the pleasures and perils of cross-cultural (mis)understanding. Putting in crisis the hasty desire for facile legibility, "The Ethnographer" points to an asymmetrical relationship: to Murdock it is given the possibility of producing knowledge about the Indian tribe, but the reverse is not true in the same way. In rather succinct fashion Borges highlights the split between *producers of thought* and *producers of objects for thought*. The divide is obviously not between those who think and those who do not, as if the story did not make clear how much thinking goes on in the tribe. Neither is it between one culture that can, by virtue of its own intrinsic properties, absorb others and another that cannot, as in the common revamping of the age-old thesis regarding the "West's" superiority.<sup>13</sup> The point is that an uneven balance of power makes not only possible but also inevitable that Indian thinking be appropriated outside by a metalanguage that turns it into raw material—without that metalanguage having to go through the same process. There is no anthropological symmetry between those who study and those who are studied; it is never a two-way street. The ethnographer is thus endowed with the possibility of an exotopic knowledge of the Other, whereas the Other can only know its student endotopically.

This asymmetry has, of course, occupied much of modern anthropology's self-examination, and the unreciprocal nature of the anthropological endeavor is a theme that dates back at least to the disciplinary crisis provoked by decolonization (Leiris; Asad). As a manifestation of "Europe's guilty conscience" (Santiago 25), modern anthropology can be read as a perennially failed attempt to come to terms with the imbalance that lies at its foundation, from the Malinowskian, functionalist emphasis on

cultural relativism and empathy with the object to James Clifford's contemporary probing into the various modes in which an "ethnographic authority" is constituted. A key moment in this history is Johannes Fabian's demonstration of how anthropology appropriates its object by converting spatial into temporal distance, thereby denying the Other coexistence in time—what Fabian calls "denial of coevalness"—so as to create the fiction of an evolutionary line at the end of which lies the ethnographer's own culture. Anthropology's guilty conscience over the asymmetry that makes it possible represents, then, an instance of the ethical problems posed by the international division of labor.<sup>14</sup> Addressing the same problem, the Borges story compellingly proposes that the abyss that separates Murdock-the-Indian from Murdock-the-ethnographer, or in other words the unbridgeable rift between experience and knowledge, is in fact what makes the ethnographer possible. Awareness of such rift, when taken to its ultimate logical consequences, would necessarily have to entail the dynamiting of the ground that sustains the discipline.

What interests me here is the national dimension of this imbalance, especially insofar as it places in crisis certain ethical formulations produced on the dominant side of the cultural and political divide. Let us say that the asymmetry highlighted by Borges, when taken to the arena of contemporary academic knowledge, is a variation on a split reproduced in the university between national traditions expected to produce thought (philosophy, "theory," etc.) and those traditions expected to provide objects for the thinking learned elsewhere; a variation, then, on the split between producers of thought and producers of objects for thought. In the colonized vernaculars and in the European languages where national philosophical traditions were not constituted<sup>15</sup>—Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, etc.—one systematically faces the effects of a perverse division of labor according to which those traditions could produce unique objects for thought—the boom of "Latin American" literature may be one of the more recent examples—but thought itself would be, at best, an application of a set of techniques learned elsewhere. Insofar as the absence of philosophy in these traditions is very real and has lasting effects, this division of labor is not simply a myth or a mistake otherwise avoidable. In other words, the asymmetry cannot be brushed aside by nativist or folklorist affirmations of originality or "difference." In some of these traditions, substituting for an absent philosophy has been, in fact, one of literature's most consistent claims to self-legitimation. The rhetoric that usually accompanies this compensatory ideology, far from questioning the international division of labor, makes the

phenomenon all the harder to fight. The separation between producers of thought and producers of objects for thought is somehow turned into a presumed asset, a fecund void to be filled by a "great" literature all too satisfied to occupy a position previously assigned.<sup>16</sup> This reinforces, in its turn, exotic expectations by those on the other side of the spectrum, i.e. the dominant traditions: "give us more García Márquez, more magical realism, give us what we don't have, after all there are plenty of people doing this theoretical stuff in English departments!"<sup>17</sup>

At stake is not simply a hierarchical distribution between theory and raw materials for theory. The structural division of labor bears crucial implications for the very relationship between *ethos* and *episteme*. For the tribe in Borges' story, as for objects of ethnographic narratives in general, mode of being is construed as inseparable from knowledge (it is by *living* that Murdock learns it, he only becomes one of them when experience and knowledge become one). That is to say, there is no separation between *ethos* and *episteme*. Murdock-the-anthropologist, on the other hand, lives in a modern world where the social spheres have been clearly marked off, and morality, aesthetics, and the sciences are three distinct domains.<sup>18</sup> The consequence is that the anthropologist (the producer of thought), unlike the tribe (construed as the producers of objects for thought), is in a situation that allows him to sever *ethos* from *episteme*, knowledge from morality, *Wissenschaft* from *Sittlichkeit*, and thus produce a truth beyond ethics, which then would only *a posteriori* be assigned a moral content. To the tribe, to those whose only knowledge of the other is endotopic, to the producers of objects for thought, such possibility is structurally precluded. This is the abyssal rift where all liberal goodwill crumbles.

Murdock, however, learns a lesson. His theoretical apparatus does not remain intact, but undergoes a total transmutation when confronted with his new object. The ideal of a successful ethnographic immersion in the Other, the dream of becoming one with the object, of achieving that completely endotopic knowledge that would be proper to the Other ends up dynamiting all roads back to the safe exotopic knowledge of the doctoral dissertation. The study of the Other would then be a necessarily failed enterprise, not in the banal sense that full knowledge of the Other is impossible, but in the more fundamental sense that in its failure resides its condition of possibility; its success forcibly entails the undermining of knowledge as such. Therefrom stems my fascination with this story's pedagogical potential: it brings us dangerously close to that abyss where knowledge faces its wholly Other, that sustaining ground which no longer belongs to knowledge as such. Is it

too modest a task to formulate a pedagogical ethics that invites students to experience the vertigo of knowledge about the Other, knowing that it may well undermine the very position from which it is possible for them to produce that knowledge? If a multicultural climate has generated a student population ever hungrier for otherness, why limit oneself to a liberal benevolence that quiets guilty consciences and changes nothing in the terms of the debate, instead of taking the truly risky step of unconditionally welcoming that otherness in ways that can produce a radical epistemic crisis in the classroom?

This crisis can be productive once Murdock's aporia is replicated in the reader. For not only is Murdock prey to the paradox of a full knowledge that undermines the channels through which that knowledge could be encoded and circulated. The reader, in the very act of reading the story, replicates the paradox. For how can the untranslatability of the indigenous secret into Murdock's dissertation be unproblematically translated into the language of the story—a language that could potentially, one assumes, generate new dissertations? The impossibility of canceling out the undecidability here places us on deconstructive terrain, i.e. *the critique of a structure one cannot but inhabit*. I cannot think of a better definition of an ethical relation to the academic apparatus. This is, I submit, the indispensable ethical foundation for future canon expansions, disciplinary and transdisciplinary revisions, institutional reforms, and curricular changes, as well as the necessary horizon for an ethic that could rethink the role not only of literatures in foreign languages but also of English, insofar as "English is in the world, not only in Britain and the United States" (Spivak, "Question" 270). Only by extracting from the object an energy that places in crisis the epistemic stance of the one who studies it can one hope to resist the exoticization that accompanies a very real, and not simply imaginary or mythical, division of labor. This job has a necessarily futural character; it can never be fully realized; hence its urgent necessity: "the moral self is a self always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough" (Bauman 80). The imperatives outlined here may not constitute a full program for the ethics of literary studies, but they place the discussion on the terrain of its conditions of possibility, which is logically prior to the discussion among the various moralities, and the various moral contents they assign to particular actions. Once we thus ground our role as intellectuals and teachers on the politico-epistemological terrain that makes it possible, the magnanimous gestures of inclusion of the Other will no longer pass as

effective ethical commitment; they will be unnecessary, and as anachronistic as the embittered prophecies of guilt uttered by the last man, as he follows, perplexed and unable to join, the swift steps of Zarathustra's dance.

## NOTES

1. I wish to express my gratitude to Christopher Dunn for his comments to this paper: *Axé!*
2. I will hereafter use "post-phenomenological thought" to refer to the diverse bodies of theory loosely connected by the critique of humanism after World War II. My preference for this term, over the shorthand "poststructuralism" popularized in the US, stems from my perception that it was the attempt to think the unexamined premises of phenomenology, not the more localized dissatisfaction with the scientific pretensions of structuralism, that endowed all those theoretical endeavors with their coherence.
3. Another example of the sweeping disqualification of literary theory among moralistic philosophers is offered by Richard Eldridge:

To the extent that literary criticism takes place through unreflectively assuming one or another stance on the historical development of language, culture, and expression, it is itself ideological and premature . . . Perhaps we cannot establish with certainty what the logic of historical development and human action is; perhaps there is no such logic. But these very thoughts ought to cast some doubt on confident assertions that human agents and their expressions are nothing but effects of linguistic codes or material forces or unconscious life or gender oppositions or whatever. (10-1).

It is at least curious that a philosopher about to criticize unreflective assumptions should so unreflectively establish such an organic relationship between literary criticism and unreflectiveness, especially when *not a single* literary critic is being examined to justify the assertion. It also intriguing that a philosopher criticizing "confident assertions" should assert so confidently that claiming "human agents" to be *nothing but . . .* is indeed what language-based, materialist, psychoanalytic, and gender criticisms are doing, without confronting or examining a single work. In fact, Eldridge's last sentence, rather than reflecting what literary criticism has done, bespeaks the tremendous anxiety of a certain US philosophical establishment facing theoretical references it does not handle and witnessing their growing impact upon young philosophy students.

4. In fact, a closer look at contemporary criticism would show that the emergence of many of the ethical issues acknowledged by Booth—say, those relating to race, class, and gender—has been dependent on and has grown in dialogue with the "formalist dissection" of "texts" that Booth disqualifies as ideologically neutral (422).
5. Despite all efforts to avoid moralistic dismissals, the anxiety over value leads Booth to disregard mass-cultural products "like *Jaws*" which "approach a limit of worthlessness" (206). The problem becomes clear when one compares that remark with Fredric Jameson's intricate reconstruction of the allegories of both the novel and the film, their respective representations of a certain pattern of disguised class conflict in post-Civil Rights America, the ideological roles of law enforcement and the science-and-technology rhetoric in the film, its veiled Utopian content, etc. ("Reification" 26-30). In this instance, clearly, aesthetic moralism has prevented the critic from confronting a rich texture of cultural and political problems present in the film.
6. See the essays collected in *Love's Knowledge*, many of which deal with James, as well as her superb *The Fragility of Goodness*, an ethical analysis of the theme of luck in Greek tragedy and philosophy. See also her use of literature in *Poetic Justice*.
7. I refer, of course, to the undoing of both hegemonic nationalism and liberal humanism

in the work of the Subaltern Studies group. See Guha, Chatterjee, and Spivak's assessment in "Subaltern."

8. For psychoanalysis this paradox is constitutive of what Lacan has called the sadist nature of the Kantian categorical imperative. See Lacan.
9. The call of the Other as an asymmetrical, constitutive, and foundational moment of ethics provides the basis for Emmanuel Levinas's uncompromising philosophy: "Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine a morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation" (Derrida, "Violence" 111). The call of the Other as the origin of responsibility is a postulate that deconstruction has maintained in order to think the notions of justice, gift, inheritance, and mourning, all intricately connected and delineating an ethical horizon in Derrida's work. For the aporias of responsibility, see *Gift* 1-34; for an analysis of the paradoxes of the gift, see *Given Time*; for the link that connects the task of mourning and inheritance with the conception of justice as a promise irreducible to any law, to any system of restitutions, see *Specters of Marx*; on how the deconstructive elaboration on responsiveness, response, responsibility would affect a renewed concept of democracy, see "Passions." For a good initial study, see Critchley. The immense, infinite task of reading Levinas can start with the two treatises, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, both available in excellent translations by Alphonso Lingis.
10. To my knowledge, no one has advanced this task more effectively than Michael Bérubé. See his detailed critique of conservative stereotypes about higher education and the role of critical theory in English departments in *Public Access*. See also his recent argument for the "employability" of English for our society, and conversely the renewed relevance of social and cultural questions for literary studies in *The Employment of English*.
11. All translations of quotes from Borges's "El etnógrafo" are mine.
12. On the notions of the endotopic and the exotopic in situations in which knowledge is inseparable from colonial or imperial enterprises, see Alberto Moreiras's response to Mark Millington's proposal of "working within the Western academy while being open to the Other," in an "understanding of the Other [that] can occur without violence being done to it" (qtd. in Moreiras 82). Moreiras compellingly asks "why such an exotopic non-violent access must be preserved at all costs" (82), especially when it does not address the fundamental dissymmetry: that "a dominated culture, insofar as it is dominated, cannot by definition have exotopic cultural knowledge of the dominant: for a dominated culture, knowledge of the dominant is always endotopic" (83).
13. For a neoconservative version of this thesis, the absurdity of which no longer needs, I believe, any arguing, see Bloom.
14. For interesting reflections on this imbalance proper to the anthropological encounter, see the collection of essays edited by Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*.
15. A contemporary Chilean philosopher has reflected on the absence of a philosophical tradition in the Spanish language in a most illuminating fashion. In *Sobre árboles y madres*, Patricio Marchant relates the telling anecdote that to a 20-year-old Chilean it is perfectly possible and feasible to utter the sentence "I am a poet," expressing a desire that may or may not be realized through a statement which is, however, within the domain of the sayable. Not so with the statement "I am a philosopher," which invariably invites, argues Marchant, the correction: "You mean a professor of philosophy" (85). In the split between philosopher and professor of philosophy, producer and reproducer of thought, Marchant reads the hierarchy I am attempting to show here.
16. In fact, the real challenge would be to think the absence of philosophy—which is to say the inevitability of translation—as the most philosophical moment of these traditions. In "Heidegger: Tono y traducción," Pablo Oyarzún explores this possibility to the full. Beginning with an allusion to the notorious Victor Fariás, author of the key book in the hysterical campaign against "Heidegger-the-Nazi," Oyarzún reads Fariás's refusal of Heidegger's invitation to translate *Being and Time* into Spanish as a moment of truth.

Fariás explains in an interview that he had refused the invitation received 20 years before the publication of *Heidegger and Nazism* because "I didn't want to dedicate 20 years to this task, and looked for an excuse. So I said: 'Professor, by reading Plato I learn Greek, by reading Heidegger I learn German.'" To that Oyarzún poses the fundamental question: "The weight here is that of the original, the *value* of the original, different from the translation. And two questions resonate in their absence. How to learn Spanish, that is, by reading whom, that is, by reading which philosopher? There is no answer. But also: why not learn Spanish by translating (for example, Heidegger)? There is no answer" (88). What Oyarzún carefully delineates in his essay is the inseparability, in Spanish—and in the national traditions running parallel to the core of Western philosophy—between *the ethics of knowledge* and *the ethics of translation*.

17. George Yúdice has offered a most emphatic critique of a multiculturalism that incorporates the Other as a typical specimen that ultimately only testifies to the fact that the dominant culture "has it all to offer," "is a mirror of the whole world." See his "We Are *Not* the World," for an analysis of how a certain US multiculturalism has preferentially absorbed those Latin American images, texts, and practices which in more docile fashion replicate fantasies of an exotic identity.
18. On the separation of the three spheres as the foundational moment of modernity see, of course, Habermas.

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